THE PARIAH

By the Author of

VICE VERSÂ

THE PARIAH

VOL. III

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THE

PARIAH

BY

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'A FALLEN IDOL' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1889

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THE PARIAH

Book V.—*continued*

CHAPTER IV

THE TORTURES OF INDECISION

Les violences qu'on se fait pour s'empêcher d'aimer sont souvent plus cruelles que les rigueurs de ce qu'on aime.—*La Rochefoucauld.*

ORME came back to town strong in his new resolve; he declined one or two invitations to houses where there was a distinct probability that he would meet Miss Chevening; he called at the Hyde Park house and left the music she had asked him to get for her, but went away without having inquired whether Mrs. Chadwick was at home.

He took up his work with desperate energy; he had several cases on his hands just then which called for all his attention, and for a time they served as a sufficient distraction from his private cares; he even began to believe that he was cured, and that his hurt had been less deep than he had fancied.

But when the press of work subsided and he was comparatively unoccupied, he awoke to the blank dreariness of the life he had set himself to lead; the novelty and exciting sense of effort which lend a certain interest to the first stage of most self-denying

ordinances had already disappeared. He groaned at his own inconsistency, at being able neither to feel as before towards Margot, nor to cast her wholly out of his thoughts.

He was thinking of all this one night when Hotham came up to his room. Orme had seen little of him of late, though they occupied the same house; for the younger man spent few of his evenings at home, and besides, being no early riser, had not shown himself in chambers for a considerable time.

So Nugent was glad to see him enter now; Guy's cheery talk was a welcome relief to his own gloomy meditations. 'Knew you wouldn't have turned in just yet,' said Guy as he came in, buttoning an elaborately braided smoking coat over his evening dress, 'so I thought I'd come in and have a chat. Haven't had one for an age.'

'You're not in as early as this as a rule,' remarked Orme, 'which accounts for it.'

'Been dining with Mrs. Chadwick. Didn't care about going on anywhere afterwards. I tell you what, Orme, I'm getting awfully hard hit over that second daughter, Ida, and I don't believe,' he added plaintively, 'she cares a single blow about me! She's so young, you see. She don't understand what love and all that sort of thing means. Not that I'd have her different, that's the great charm of her to me. Think of knowing that one would be the very first in a girl's heart. When a girl's been through two or three seasons, you *can't* feel that. I don't know if you are like me, but I

couldn't bear the idea that a girl had cared for any other fellow before me.'

'What does it matter?' said Orme, 'so long as she has left off caring for him. You're too exacting. Could you fulfil the same condition yourself?'

'That's different,' said Guy. 'Call it absurd if you like, that's the feeling I have about it.' And then he went off into a rhapsody, expatiating on Ida's perfections. Orme heard him patiently; he was not particularly interested in Ida, who struck him as unformed and somewhat characterless, but she was Margot's sister; Guy had probably met Margot herself that evening; he longed, in spite of his resolves, to hear her name.

'I tell you everything about *my* love affair,' said Guy, when he had exhausted the subject, 'but you never tell me how things are going between you and the fair Miss Margot! She was saying this evening that she never saw you now. You could have met her at several places lately if you had taken the trouble.'

'I've been busy,' said Orme.

'You would have managed to go all the same, if you had cared about it. I don't want to be indiscreet, old fellow, but have you quarrelled?'

'No.'

'Then why are you fighting shy of her like this?'

'Because I've come to the conclusion it's the wisest thing to do, if you want to know.'

'Well, you know best, but you're not likely to get her if you never go near her, you know—*are* you?'

'Look here, Guy, it's as well to have this understood. I was mistaken in what I told you about Miss Chevening some time ago—you must forget it.'

'Mistaken? Not you—I know better. Do you think I didn't see how you brightened up at her very name?' said Guy, with a simple boyish pride in his own penetration. 'Come, don't you be an old ass, Orme. I doubt if it's anything like so hopeless as you seem to think—anyway, where's the sense of throwing away all your chances to gratify your precious pride?'

'You don't understand.'

'Don't I? Well, you don't deserve it, but I'm going to give you one more chance. If you let this go, I shan't take any more trouble about it. I've induced my aunt to get up a water-party next Saturday—she has a mortal funk of a boat, but that's neither here nor there. The Chevening girls are going—I settled all that this evening; I've undertaken to find some men to come and row. Will you come?'

'I don't see how I could get away in time,' said Orme irresolutely.

'Ah, there you are! But you ought to know, if you don't, that the Courts won't sit at all on Saturday. I saw it in the paper to-day—there's a meeting of the Judges, or something; *now* what excuse have you got?'

Orme sat reflecting. He was a little ashamed of his own cowardice: he must meet Margot at some time, why not get it over? Might not the effect of meeting her face to face after what he knew be to break the spell?

He caught even at so flimsy a pretext as this. 'Very well,' he said at last, 'I'll come.' But if he had not already felt the hollowness of this philosophy, the load that was lifted from his spirits, the sense he had of recovered interest in life, should have sufficed to undeceive him.

Yet, when Saturday came, and, as the party assembled on the Paddington platform, he saw her once more, he felt a sudden fear of himself. Why could he not restrain his heart from beating faster at the sight of her? Why did the mere touch of her gloved hand send the old thrill through him? He was far indeed from a cure as yet, as he acknowledged to himself in humiliation. But he must harden his heart against her, and he would remember that this same girl, who stood there with her exquisite face and sparkling eyes in almost childlike anticipation of enjoyment, was utterly without heart, capable of sacrificing anyone who stood in her path with the most consummate selfishness. The thought of Allen—what he might have been, and what, owing to her, he was—came to Nugent's aid now.

'I thought we should have met before this,' she was saying, 'or I should have written to thank you for getting those songs for me.'

'It was not worth it,' he replied with a guilty consciousness of the treasure her letter would have been to him.

'You might have spared time to come in!' she said; 'we were all at home that afternoon.'

'Thank you; I was not able to come in, unfortunately.'

'Really? But no doubt your time is very much occupied.' She spoke lightly enough, and yet there was a suspicion of pain in the mockery that lit her eyes.

'It is,' he said; he felt that he was going to the other extreme in his efforts to withstand her, and that she saw and resented his brusqueness, but he could not help it.

'And yet you are going to give up a whole day! Isn't that rather unwise?'

'Possibly—but I will take the risk.'

She made no answer; a coldness was established between them as they stood there, and presently she turned and walked on with the others towards the train. Orme followed without keeping at her side. They were too many for all to travel in the same compartment, and he deliberately chose the one in which she was not. His reflections during the short journey to Taplow were sombre enough. He called himself a fool for coming—doubly a fool for being unable to command himself better. Why could he not trust himself to look at her, to speak to her? What would she care whether he kept away or not? All the way down he was picturing her in the adjoining compartment, straining his ears to catch her voice, her clear low laugh, and still he knew that, in avoiding her, he would be sparing himself much distress of mind in the future.

He had been impatient for the train to stop and give

him the opportunity of seeing her again, but when this happened and they were all walking down to the landing-stage, he could not bring himself to approach her. He sought a safeguard in the society of one of his fellow-travellers—a young lady who had come in high-heeled shoes, and a dust-cloak as a useful precaution on the river. Her remarks were neither many nor particularly entertaining, but he tried to give his whole attention to listening and replying—anything to prevent his thoughts from straying to the graceful figure in front.

Where had all his indignation departed to? She had sunk infinitely below his ideal of her, forfeited her title to true and tender womanhood: what she had done was utterly repellent to him—yet, now that he saw her, he could not feel this repulsion.

Was his love unaltered, then, in spite of all? He knew that this could not be—that what remained was a passion robbed of all the spirituality that lifts love above the common earth. Should he descend to such a level—love without trust, without respect? Never, he swore to himself; he saw his danger, he knew his weakness, he would be on his guard for this one day, and be wiser in future.

So, during the inevitable discussion that took place on the Maidenhead landing-stage (for, like most water-parties, they had started with no very definite plan) Orme did not go near Miss Chevening or join more than was absolutely necessary in the rather protracted debate.

At last the arrangements got themselves settled in some way: it was decided to row as far up the river as time allowed, have afternoon tea in some river-side inn garden, and return to dinner at the hotel.

'Now about boats?' said Guy Hotham: 'we'd better take three, I think. Miss Chevening, are you going to row?'

'If I may,' said Margot, who was stripping off her gloves. 'I haven't rowed for ever so long. I want to see if I have forgotten.' She was charming in her splendid physical health and joyous vitality. Orme could not help allowing his eyes to dwell on her with something of the old wondering delight.

'All right, then,' he heard Hotham answer; 'then will you take bow in this first boat? Your sister and I will look after the steering, and Orme will stroke—he's a swell at it, rowed in his College boat up at Oxford. Where has he got to?'

Before Orme's resolutions could be exposed to this fresh test, Miss Chevening had calmly interposed: 'Not Mr. Orme, please,' she said; 'my rowing is not up to the College standard. I would much rather not spoil his pleasure—and mine. Find me some one not quite so—superior.'

Guy did not, of course, permit himself to show any astonishment at this. 'Poor old Orme!' was his inward comment; 'not much chance there, I'm afraid. Girls are rum things—I thought she rather liked him than not.'

Whether Margot had intended Orme to hear her

reply or not, he did hear it, and, inconsistently enough, was mortified. But the next moment he experienced a sardonic amusement of this revelation of his own lurking vanity and insincerity. What a miserable humbug, what a conceited prig he was, after all, he thought wrathfully; had he not determined to keep away from her? She had seen his intention and very naturally forestalled him. What else could he expect?—what else in the name of common sense did he want? He had no right to be there at all if he could not avoid ridiculous Byronics; whatever he felt and must feel, he would forswear posing.

So he did his best to throw off all unhealthy sentiment, and devote himself to entertaining Mrs. Antrobus and the young lady of the dust-cloak as they sat in front of him, expressing their admiration of river scenery with the ghastly smiles of nervous persons who are carrying their lives in their hands.

And in course of time he succeeded in removing their worst terrors and convincing them that they might feel tolerably safe under his care and that of his companion. Mrs. Antrobus became more and more gracious as her alarm vanished, and, being a chatty and lively old lady on *terra firma*, was gradually drawn into displaying almost her normal powers of conversation. Orme, somewhat to his surprise, found himself able to talk and laugh, even to feel a growing pleasure in all his surroundings, in the scent of the late hawthorn and meadowsweet on the banks, the cool shade of the noble woods as they glided past, the deep blue sky, veined

and streaked like marble with pure white, and in the musical plash of the sculls as they struck the water.

The boats kept together as much as possible, and sometimes Margot's was near enough to allow him to notice the grace and ease with which she managed her sculls, the unsuspected capacity of those soft and shapely hands of hers; her voice reached him across the water —such a clear, sweet voice, with that delicate inflection of haughtiness. Now and then they came to a lock, with its pretty rustic cottage and gay little garden of rose-trees, stocks, and marigolds; and here, though he had to give his attention to keeping his boat away from posts and chains while the water rose, not one of Miss Chevening's looks or words escaped him as she sat close by.

But he was able to take note of her almost dispassionately now. She might look as distractingly lovely as ever, turn the head, as she seemed in a fair way to do, of the good-looking youth in the stroke seat, Orme felt no jealousy; he had resigned all his own pretensions; what harm was there in studying her, so long as he remembered that he must beware of anything more?

When they landed for afternoon tea at a river-side inn garden, she made some indifferent little remark to him, as if she did not choose to allow anything so pronounced as a mutual avoidance, and he was glad to take the way of escape offered him from the straits into which his own want of self-command had brought them. But although they talked for some little time, he could see that she did so for form's sake, and perfectly understood

and was satisfied that the friendship between them was at an end.

He did not sit near her when tea was brought out under the trees on the lawn, but he observed that she was amongst the most light-hearted of the party; her laughter had a painful sound to his ear. Yet why should she not laugh?—she was giving up nothing.

Well, thank heaven, the worst was over now! There was not much more of this day to get through; they would be rowing home soon, and he would be out of sight of her dear face. He felt that his attitude of dispassionate study was not tenable after all.

But when the time came for re-embarking, Mrs. Antrobus took it into her head to rearrange the crews, with the result that Orme had to give up his sculls to a young man who had not been rowing as yet.

'Miss Chevening, will you come in my boat, please?' she said; 'I am sure you must want some rest.'

'I'm not a bit tired!' said Margot eagerly; 'indeed I would rather row—if you don't mind!'

'Then you shall. Mr. Orme will go up to that little seat in the end, and you can take the place next to it.'

The other boats were already occupied, and Margot had nothing to do but consent, though she would perhaps have preferred to excuse herself. She was obliged to accept Orme's hand in stepping into the boat, which she did without looking at him.

After all, it was Orme who had least cause to welcome an arrangement which broke through all his resolutions, and yet he was disagreeably conscious of a secret

satisfaction in being in her near neighbourhood. He need not speak to her, only lie there in a sort of dream, listening to the tinkle and murmur of the water at the bows, and lazily watching the flakes of liquid light contracting, expanding, and interlacing over the olive-green ripples, while his eyes returned again and again to the figure immediately before him. Her face was hidden from him, except that, as she turned her head now and then, he had a glimpse of the pure oval of her cheek, touched by the mellow light.

How could she look so innocent of all that was cold and cruel, and yet be what she was—what she must be, if Millicent had spoken truth? What if he carried out his first intention after all, and asked Margot to tell him her story? Oh, it was too late for that! This afternoon had sundered them too far to make it ever possible to ask for any explanation with the slightest hope that she would deign to give it.

Then he came to himself with a start. How much longer would he vacillate like this? had he not realised long ago that no explanation she could give would alter the impression of Millicent's words? Let him be thankful, then, that he was saved from the temptation of ignobly condoning what he knew should steel his heart against her for ever.

In the meantime it was sweet—subtly, poisonously sweet—to lie there and fancy what might have been.

But here something happened which put an end to all idle dreaming of this kind. As he lay there in the bows he was startled by the sound of oars seemingly

close behind them, and turned to see a racing ship bearing down on them at a good rate.

'Oh, dear!' cried Mrs. Antrobus helplessly, 'there's a boat right in front of us; what ought I to do *now*?' For the good lady, owing to the incapacity of her young friend in the dust-cloak, had been holding the rudder-lines, with the management of which she was scarcely more familiar. Being requested to 'pull to the right—hard,' she naturally hauled at the left with all the energy of complete flurry, and Orme, shouting to warn the approaching oarsmen, who had no coxswain, leaned forward with outstretched hand to break the shock of the collision which was now inevitable. Unfortunately for him, he had not calculated for the way on the other boat—the iron-tipped prow of the light ship caught his hand, and crushed it against the gunwale of the boat he was in, wedging it in the cleft it made in the upper plank. Neither boat, however, possibly owing to his interposition, was injured seriously; there was the usual confusion and exchange of slightly recriminatory apologies, and then both boats went on their way.

'What stupid people!' Mrs. Antrobus remarked placidly, 'not to look where they were going to. I quite expected we should all be upset. You are sure no water can come through that crack, Mr. Orme?'

'It's all right,' he called to her; 'well above the water!'

'I'm very glad it was no worse,' she said; 'I *do* wish people wouldn't be so careless!'

'I think,' remarked Margot over her shoulder, 'that you might have kept a more careful look-out, Mr. Orme —you had nothing else to do!'

He was setting his teeth hard to repress a groan. Trivial as the accident sounds, it caused him the most exquisite pain; his thumb was laid open to the bone, and was bleeding copiously; he tried to hold it in the water, but that only increased the burning throb which turned him sick and faint. And in the midst of all this came Miss Chevening's little gibe, which sounded unfeeling enough just then.

'You are rather hard on me!' he managed to say in a low voice.

'Am I?' she returned. 'I think people should not come out on these expeditions unless they intend to make themselves either useful or agreeable. I can't compliment you on having exhibited either quality at present.'

'I did not ask for compliments.'

'You do not give yourself the trouble to deserve them,' she answered, feeling secure in the knowledge that their conversation was inaudible to anyone else in the boat.

A pause, during which he was endeavouring to staunch the blood with his handkerchief.

'I do not see,' observed Miss Chevening at last, 'why two persons who have been on tolerably good terms for some time should suddenly behave with absolute incivility to one another.'

'Are we uncivil?'

'Are we! are we not? Have you made a solitary

remark of your own free will since we started an hour ago?'

'I might reply,' he said grimly—he was almost beside himself with physical pain—'that your own efforts were not exactly conciliatory.'

'Perhaps not. Why should I conciliate? Why do you need conciliating?'

He was silent; the present was no time for explaining, even if he had felt equal to it just then; as it was, this unexpected attack of hers in the state he was in tried his nerves and temper almost past endurance.

'You don't seem to have any answer to give me,' she continued remorselessly.

'Forgive me,' he said faintly; 'I—I am really not quite myself just now; don't think me ungracious if I ask you to spare me all these questions.'

She laughed. 'I have brought that on myself,' she said. 'I shall be careful how I invite such a hint again. Let me recommend you to smoke. I shall not mind in the least, and you are evidently in want of a sedative.'

He did not answer. The pain he was in was so great as to make him almost unconscious, but through it all he felt the injustice of her speech. Should he tell her? What would she care? A pinched thumb was not an accident to make a fuss about; he did not want to make Mrs. Antrobus uncomfortable, or spoil the pleasure of the party; he could bear the pain—only, it must be in silence.

It was not until they were in Boulter's lock that Miss Chevening addressed him again. 'I don't pretend

to be useful in a lock,' she said; 'surely you might exert yourself to that slight extent, Mr. Orme!'

'I beg your pardon,' he said, stretching out his left hand for the boathook. 'I thought stroke was doing all that was necessary.'

'Wouldn't you on the whole be more successful in hooking that chain if you used your right hand?' she suggested.

He had been keeping it behind him as far as possible. 'No doubt,' he replied wearily; 'but it's slightly disabled for the moment.'

Her eyes lost their mockery in an instant as she read the suffering in his face. 'How did you do it?' she asked. 'Let me see it, please; I may be of some use!'

'You had better not; it is not a pleasant sight. Never mind about it now, Miss Chevening, I don't want Mrs. Antrobus to know.'

'Show it to me at once,' she said. 'Oh, how dreadful!—and how it is bleeding! Why did you not tell me? Let me bind it up for you. Yes, you must!'

She took her own handkerchief and bound it round the wound with slim fingers which were gentle and firm, though her face was pale and her lips quivering a little. Orme felt too weak to protest; a moment before, and he had been thinking bitterly that she was indeed incapable of any tenderness, yet her whole expression now was softened by the sweetest compassion. When would he succeed in forgetting the touch of her hands as they ministered to him? He tried to thank

her, but she stopped him: 'I have only done what I should do for anybody,' she said hurriedly. 'This is a truce, you know. Directly you land you must go and see a surgeon. We won't frighten dear Mrs. Antrobus by telling her till it is all over, will we? But I wish you had let me know before.'

As soon as they were at Maidenhead again, Margot found Hotham and made him take Orme in search of a surgeon, and after one or two fruitless visits they found an old gentleman who did all that was necessary.

Orme came back with the pain considerably relieved, and found the rest of the party already at dinner; a vacant seat had been left for him next to Margot's, and he took it with a secret gratification.

By this time his hostess had heard about the accident, and he was able to assure her that it was trifling enough. 'You don't think you'll have lockjaw?' she said anxiously. 'I've known of it coming on when the thumb was injured. You are sure you feel able to eat? Lockjaw's such a dreadful thing to have! And so you hurt your hand in that last lock? I detest locks! I can't think why they have them on the river at all—dangerous hindrances *I* call them!'

She had no suspicion that her own erratic steering had contributed to Nugent's accident, for which he was thankful.

His hand was bandaged in a manner which made it difficult to use his knife, as Miss Chevening presently discovered. 'If you are not too independent,' she said,

with a touch of shyness, 'you had better let me cut up your food for you.'

He protested, laughing, that he would not trouble her, and persevered.

'Why are you so obstinate?' she said at last, after watching his unavailing efforts. 'You know you are perfectly helpless! It is not a very overwhelming obligation, I should have thought,' she added, a little wistfully.

He had to yield and allow her to render him this prosaic service, which she performed with a serious dignity that lent it a mysterious charm.

It was pleasant—that dinner in the hotel room, with the French windows opening on the lawn and its rose trees, and the river, where the passing boats left a sparkling white trail as they glided by in the dusk. How could he help being sensible of the dangerous attractiveness of his lovely neighbour? Was it wonderful that the yearning returned to believe her all he had once imagined—the insidious desperate hope that, if he had courage to appeal to her, the shadow that stood between them might by some inexplicable means be made to disappear?

But he saw no real prospect of it; she would not even give him the opportunity of speaking now, supposing he were willing. This was only a truce, as she seemed constantly to be reminding him; very soon they would be on their way to town, and he would see her no more. She had far too much spirit not to accept the total estrangement he had suggested.

Be it so, then—it brought him back to his original position. Nothing could be done; the barrier between them was not to be removed without ignoring her conduct to Allen. He could not ignore it—he should despise himself if he could. And unless he could do this, the less he saw of her in future the better for his own honour and happiness.

So when they adjourned to the lawn for coffee, he devoted himself to Mrs. Antrobus with a thankful sense that his term of probation was nearly at an end.

The young lady in the dust-cloak, which nothing had induced her to remove throughout the day, had betrayed one constant anxiety—the fear that she would not return to town in time for a certain dance; and Mrs. Antrobus had accordingly arranged to go back by an earlier train for her sake.

And now the waiter appeared with the announcement that the flies were at the door and, if they wished to catch the earlier train, they must go at once. There was some amount of bustle and confusion before they could get off, and Orme found himself, without any contrivance on his own part, in the same open carriage as Margot, with Guy and Ida as the other occupants.

As they approached the station, a train passed along the high embankment in sharp relief against the green sky. The driver whipped his horse into a gallop. 'We shall miss it!' cried Guy. 'Our young friend in the dust-cloak will lose her dance, which will be a pity, for I believe she had dressed for it before she came out!'

'And that was why she kept the cloak on—to hide

her ball-dress!' said Ida. 'She talked of nothing but dancing the whole day. It was all "Had we been to such a ball? Were we going to Mrs. So-and-So's dance?" So silly—as if it mattered!'

The train had stopped; as the fly rolled up to the end of the steps, they heard the whistle; they reached the platform to find it empty.

'They've gone on without us!' said Guy, without exhibiting any inconsolable depression. 'I daresay they thought we had got in somewhere. Well, *we* can't help it, can we?

> 'Since for that early train we're late,
> We will not make our woes the text
> Of sermons to the Times—but wait
> On for the next!'

he quoted, adapting Calverley to his own purposes.

Margot had said nothing; she was already walking slowly towards the end of the platform. Ida, declaring that she was tired, had sat down, and Guy had followed her example. Orme stood for a moment irresolute—he could hardly allow Miss Chevening to promenade the platform alone; he would at least leave it to her to decline his escort if she chose, as she probably would choose.

She had turned and was coming towards him, looking subdued and sad, and a little weary, and he waited for her with a heart that began to beat faster. It might be that the opportunity he had half longed for, half dreaded, had come at last. If only he could feel sure what he would say or leave unsaid!

CHAPTER V

MISS CHEVENING'S CANDOUR

L'envie de faire voir nos défauts du côté que nous voulons bien les montrer fait une grande partie de notre sincérité.

La Rochefoucauld.

'Is your hand still painful?' was Miss Chevening's first question, put after a moment of embarrassed silence and with a touch of very unusual timidity.

'A little,' he replied; 'nothing worth speaking of—it will be all right in a day or two.'

'It looked such a dreadful wound,' she said, closing her eyes tight, like a child, at the recollection. 'You must have thought I was very unfeeling in the boat,' she went on; 'but I had no idea that you were hurt at all until we were in that lock.'

'I quite understood,' he said heartily. 'Pray don't say anything more about it.'

She stood at the edge of the platform looking down on the rails and ballast for some time, and then she suddenly raised her eyes and turned to him: 'I wish,' she said impetuously, 'I wish you would tell me what I have done that displeases you.'

It was precisely the question he had been determined

to avoid, and yet, now that it had come, the temptation to appeal to her was very strong. He put it by for the time however—'How have I shown that I was displeased?' he said.

'How? By your behaviour all through the day—you have not once spoken to me except when you could not possibly help yourself. If we had never met before, instead of being, as I thought only a little time ago, quite old friends, you could not have been more stiff and formal. It is useless to deny it, and, if you please, I am rather curious to know what it all means.'

She was trying to speak lightly and unconcernedly, but there was a real anxiety in her eyes—a wistful desire to know whether something she seemed to fear was true. Orme was moved in spite of himself; there was something frank and natural in this direct challenge which seemed inspired by a consciousness of innocence. If, after all, he had been too hasty to judge her; if—but he dared not indulge such a supposition—she *could* not be innocent.

'I cannot tell you,' he said, 'without going into matters that you have forbidden me to speak about.'

'Ah, then I can guess—it is something to do with Allen! There, I knew I was right—it is always Allen. I did ask you not to mention his name to me again, I remember; never mind, I give you leave to mention it now as much as you please—so long as you tell me what you have heard that seems to have given you such a bad opinion of me.'

'I will tell you, then,' he said bluntly. 'I have

heard that it was you who obliged him to leave home, against his will. Do you deny it?'

'I was sure that Millicent had told you,' she said. 'No, why *should* I deny it? It is true.'

It was over. She had admitted it. His last feeble spark of hope had died. 'And you made me believe he had gone out of his own free will; that it was his own plan which you had helped him to carry out!'

Margot coloured. 'You assumed that it was so, and I did not choose to undeceive you. Was that very wicked of me?'

'You had the right to refuse me your confidence if you thought fit. No—the wickedness (you used the word first) was not towards me.'

'You *do* think I acted wickedly then?' she said. 'May I ask where you consider my wickedness lay?'

'Where?' he cried, all his indignation roused afresh by her insensibility. 'Is it possible you need me to point it out to you? Ask yourself what harm that poor fellow had done to you, that you could not be content until he was sent out of your sight? Oh, I know all you would say. He irritated your nerves, offended your fastidiousness, made you ashamed of him in a hundred ways. Granted all that, was it any reason why you should use all your influence to have him sent away from his home, where he was honestly trying to improve, where his only chance of improvement was. You knew, because you were warned, that the life you meant him to lead was one that he had no liking for, and as little fitness. You might have had some pity on

him, and declined to condemn him, untrained, ill-regulated, friendless as he was, to exile ; but you would not listen ; you carried your point, and you cannot even see at what a cost to another you have purchased your own comfort! I am not good at hiding my thoughts. Knowing all this, I can't behave as if—as if it made no difference. It *does* make a difference—all the difference in the world, as far as I am concerned. Of course, I know very well that you can dispense easily enough with my friendship—I wish it was as easy for me to withdraw—as I must.'

'You are certainly outspoken,' she said haughtily ; 'even Millicent was not more candid. It seems that I must resign myself to lose *your* friendship, too, then? I don't pretend not to feel a little sorry ; I even think you are rather hard on me.' She turned away her head for a moment. 'If you knew more you might make some allowances for me, you might come to believe that I am not such a monster of hard-heartedness as you imagine ; but I don't know—very likely I am as wicked as you say ; it is not worth discussing my precise shade of iniquity!' She paused, and then resumed more gently : 'It is silly of me to care,' she said ; 'but after all, I *do* care. I don't choose that you should go away with a worse impression than I deserve. I have a right to be heard in my own defence. I am going to tell you what nobody knows outside my own family ; perhaps it is wrong, undignified, to speak at all after what you have said—but you will not misunderstand my motives. I am not begging for

your friendship, I only wish you to know my side of the story.

'You don't know all I had to bear. You speak of Allen as harmless, as if roughness and want of manners were his worst faults. If that had been all—but—but there are things I can't tell you. One thing I must. He was bad, *really* bad. Even at Trouville I saw that. He was—dishonest. Ah, you don't believe it; you think it is all prejudice, and you have made up your mind that he was ill-used—a poor, harmless, well-meaning creature! What will you say when I tell you that he was caught in the very act of stealing? He was—he stole a locket; a valuable locket belonging to me. It was his father—not I—who determined that the only course to take after that was to send him abroad. And then Allen begged to have his conduct passed over; to be allowed to live at home just as before, and, as I was the person he had—had robbed, they left it to me to say whether he should be sent away or not. Put yourself in my position for a moment. I disliked him (I have never disguised that—we all disliked him), I was afraid of him. I—I had reasons. After the way he had behaved, it was simply impossible to live on in the same house together. And—though of course you may not choose to believe me—I did honestly think that India was the best place for him; that he would like his new life when he was once there; be kept from falling again into bad habits. My step-father himself took that view. What other answer could I give? If I could have foreseen—but how could I? So I said

—what you know, and if I had to go through it all over again I should do exactly the same. I can't help it if it horrifies you—I know I should.'

To estimate the effect of her words upon Orme, it must be remembered how strong her personal fascination had been over him from the first; how impossible it had been to him, even when he most condemned what she had done, to feel harshly towards her.

He had spoken sternly, but it was the crime, not the criminal, that excited his indignation, and some of his sternness was due perhaps to a secret consciousness that he was only too much disposed to leniency.

And now he had heard her account—and he could hold out against her no longer. He never doubted that she was speaking the truth; her manner was too entirely convincing to admit of that, and her story gave him the excuse he had longed for and despaired of for acquitting her of all that had seemed most cold-blooded and unscrupulous.

Thank God, she was less to blame than he could ever have hoped to find her! If the part she had played was not the most merciful, at least it had been forced upon her; she had not acted without provocation—how great provocation and for how long, who could say?

Faulty as she might be, he knew the worst: it gave him no right to judge her, it made it no shame to love her still. Oh, the inexpressible relief of knowing that! What should he say to her? how retract the accusation he had presumed, in his self-righteous folly, to bring against her?

He was saved from the necessity of speaking immediately by the deafening rush and roar of an express through the station. When the long line of rocking carriages, with the comfortable profiles at the lighted windows had passed, leaving a whirlwind of cold air in its wake, Margot came forward from the palings to which she had retreated. 'I am waiting for you to say something,' she said. 'I want to know what you think of all this—now I have told you?'

'What am I to say to you?' he said. 'If I had known all this I would have cut my tongue out sooner than say what I did! Why did you not tell Millicent what you have just told me?'

'Why? Because I did not choose. Do you think it is so easy and pleasant to expose one's family secrets? Besides, Millicent would not have listened—she would not have believed me, very likely. Are you quite sure that you believe me yourself?'

'You can't forgive me!' he cried. 'I don't wonder. But, indeed, I had no idea before that that poor fellow had any actual harm in him—it never entered my head that he was a scoundrel—that any temptation could have made him a thief! I was mistaken in him, it seems. If that had been my worst mistake—'

'And you don't think I was wrong in having him sent away?'

'Wrong? I don't know: I have no right to judge. Perhaps, if—bad as he was—you could have given him one more chance— But you say there are circumstances you can't tell me. I suppose there was no other course

to take.' And I ought to have known that you would not act lightly, or without compunction or pity for him. I ought to have felt that. Will you ever forgive me, Miss Chevening, for saying such things as I did to you? Are we still friends?'

She had recovered her ascendency over him, but the victory seemed to have aroused the sense of injury—she could not bring herself to overlook his offence. Having humbled herself to make a particular statement to avoid forfeiting his regard, and, having succeeded, she could not yet forgive him for forcing such an explanation from her.

'Then you really do propose to honour me with your friendship after all!' she exclaimed. 'Had you not better reflect a little before you commit yourself again?'

'Now you are cruel!' he said in a low voice.

'No, I am not. Remember how solemnly you renounced any further acquaintance with me a few minutes ago. You oughtn't to be surprised if I feel a little doubt about our future relations. Naturally, I should like to be spared any repetition of to-day's—uncertainty!'

'Our future relations must depend on you—not me,' he said.

'Must they? Then I will try not to decide hastily. I will think over it; there will be plenty of time to do that before we meet again, and then I shall probably know better than I do now what I really feel about it. Don't let us say any more about it just now, and I think

we had better go back to my sister and Mr. Hotham—our train must be almost due by this time.'

He obeyed gloomily enough. Clearly there was nothing to be gained by pressing her for an answer while she was in her present mood. He had offended her, and if she chose to treat him coldly in the future, or even drop him altogether, it would only be what he deserved. And, as he thought of this, he felt a bitterness rising in his heart against the absent and missing Allen, in whose unworthy cause he had incurred the crushing burden of his lady's displeasure.

On returning to the sheltered part of the station, where by this time a considerable crowd had collected, they found Guy Hotham and Ida still on the seat where they had been left. Ida rose and came to meet her sister; drawing her apart, 'Margot,' she said hurriedly, her face looking white and frightened under the gaslight, 'do you know who is here—on the platform?'

A certain apprehension was visible in the elder sister's face.

'Not—not *Allen*?' she exclaimed under her breath.

'No, no—Mr. Melladew.'

Margot's expression relaxed. 'Is that all, dear?' she said, with a laugh. 'What if he is?'

'Nothing,' said Ida nervously. 'Only I thought I would tell you—in case . . . Margot, you won't recognise him, will you?'

'I have no particular wish to speak to Mr. Melladew, dear; why are you so anxious that I should cut him dead?'

'Because I am,' said Ida impatiently. 'You will do as I ask you, Margot, won't you?'

'Certainly, dear. I should have done so in any case, for that matter. I don't suppose he is at all anxious for a recognition.'

The train came up just then, and the four had just secured an empty compartment when a fifth person entered. It was Melladew, somewhat altered from the slim and elegant tutor of two years ago; he had grown stouter and flabbier, he was less carefully dressed, he had evidently not been to Maidenhead for boating purposes. He took the middle seat between Orme and Ida, opposite to Margot. Ida had shrunk back, with a deep flush, and turned her face to the window, which seemed to disconcert him.

Poor Melladew bore it as long as he could. He had apparently counted upon being recognised, and Margot's eyes showed no consciousness of having seen him before; he seemed half inclined to recall himself to her recollection, but his courage failed him, as well it might. Finally, after growing more and more ill at ease, he left the carriage at the next station with a pathetic little sigh as he let down the glass.

'That fellow looked as if he fancied he knew you, Miss Chevening,' said Guy, after he had gone. 'He opened his mouth to speak once or twice, and then thought better of it.'

'He found out his mistake in time, I suppose,' said Margot indifferently. 'I hate having to tell people I don't know them, don't you?' And this led Guy to

recount his own experiences of a similar kind, which had the desired effect of diverting the conversation from its original subject.

But the conversation soon flagged and became spasmodic; Ida took no part in it, and sat gazing abstractedly out into the darkness, while Guy was watching her with a cloud on his face; Margot lay back with her eyes closed, and Orme was silently reproaching himself for his own precipitate folly in speaking as he had done. How could he have taken up the cause of such a worthless being as Allen against a girl like this one opposite—a girl who, as his instinct should have told him, was sweet and noble and good? It was natural that she should shrink from her step-brother, natural that she should resent having to associate with him. Ought she to have borne with him, to have pleaded for him? No doubt a creature who was all angelic meekness would have done so—Margot Chevening was not meek: she was no angel, and he loved her the better for it. Allen had forfeited all his sympathy: he saw him now as an irreclaimably vicious young scamp, for whom exile was probably a better fate than he deserved. And what had Margot done but declined to intervene? Orme grew hot as he thought of all his heroics. How could she pardon the things he had said to her? How could he pardon himself such sentimental quixotry?

And yet, in truth, he need not have been ashamed of his indignation—it was the effect of a generous sympathy with the unfortunate and oppressed; he had

spoken under pressure, sacrificing his love to his sense of honour and justice; it was not his fault that he had not been more fully informed. Some would have held that, even on the facts, she had not cleared herself entirely from the charges that had been brought against her.

But with Orme the reaction was too complete; he loved her too well to have any reservations or self-justifications now. He was only too thankful to have it demonstrated to him that his love need not be renounced, that his divinity was not to be dethroned. And yet, as he realised bitterly, he had lost her again in the very act of regaining her! Ah, if only he had never listened to Millicent—if only he had had more confidence: but it was too late now for regrets of this sort, he must wait the course of events.

And at last—it seemed an interminable journey to more than one of the party—they were at Paddington, standing together under the bluish glare of the electric lights. While a hansom was being called for the two sisters, Orme found an opportunity to make one last appeal to Margot. 'I don't ask you to forgive me,' he said—'at least, not now, but think as kindly of me as you can. You don't know how severe a punishment it would be to me to feel I had lost your friendship past all recovery!'

Such humility was almost a provocation to trample upon it. 'Shall I tell you how you may make your punishment easier?' she asked.

'If you will!' he said, more hopefully.

'It is quite simple: you have only to forget our last

conversation—then my friendship will be as undesirable as you seem to have been considering it all day. Good-night, Mr. Orme.'

She gave him her hand without looking at him, and he stood by helplessly while Guy Hotham put her into the hansom. Orme had a glimpse of her pale, proud profile as the cab passed him; she did not appear to notice his bow—she was mortally offended; he gazed after the hansom with a sigh. Just then his feeling towards Millicent was hardly brotherly.

'What have you done to poor Mr. Hotham, Ida?' asked Margot, as they drove home—'he seemed quite depressed; you haven't been quarrelling, have you?'

'No,' said Ida; 'at least, I don't know how it was. He was very pleasant while we were at Taplow—until that hateful Mr. Melladew came up and sat down quite close by us, and somehow it—it worried me so, Margot, and I couldn't go on talking, and I'm afraid Guy—Mr. Hotham—noticed it, for he changed directly.'

'But why should seeing Mr. Melladew worry you? You made a perfect goose of yourself when he followed us into the carriage, do you know?'

'Did I? Do you think Mr. Hotham saw it? I couldn't help it, Margot. Seeing him again like that made me remember things. And I want to forget them—I thought I *had* forgotten!'

'It is rather foolish, don't you think, to feel so strongly about poor Camilla, after all these years? I know she treated you very badly in going away without a word as she did, but I don't see that Mr. Melladew

was so much to blame,' said Margot, innocently enough. 'Really, when I saw him sitting there, with that tail-between-the-legs expression, begging to be noticed, I was half-inclined to speak to him—perhaps it was better not.'

'*Much* better!' declared Ida. 'I'm so glad you didn't. If you had, I would not have stayed in the carriage. Wasn't he looking fat and horrid?' she added vindictively. 'I wish I had not seen him—he quite spoilt my day!'

'Something always does happen sooner or later to spoil a day when you come out expressly for pleasure,' said Margot wearily; 'however, this one is over, thank goodness!'

Orme and Hotham were walking back to their rooms through the hot streets now shuttered and silent.

Neither Guy nor Nugent was inclined for conversation. 'We don't seem particularly lively to-night,' observed the younger man at length.

'What is it you want to do?' inquired Orme—'dance home?'

'I feel about as much like dancing as you do just now, I can tell you,' remarked Guy gloomily. 'I've had a beastly day.'

'If it's any comfort to you to know it,' said Orme, with a short laugh, 'so have I. But I should have thought *you* had no reason to complain, at all events.'

'That's all you know! Not that I had, till just at the end. We were getting on together like—like bricks, and then, all at once, something I said didn't please

her. I'm sure I don't know why, I don't remember saying anything she could take offence at—but she did, she turned perfectly silent, would hardly speak to me, let me see as plainly as possible that I was boring her—so at last I gave it up. It's hard lines, Orme, I can tell you,' continued Guy, with a suspicious break in his voice, 'when you care for a girl as I do for Ida, to feel you—you only bore her!'

Orme laughed—it is wonderful how wretched one can be and yet laugh. 'How can you possibly tell if she was bored? She probably had a headache or something; you don't mean to say you've been constructing a tragedy out of that! My dear Guy, you must be desperately bent on being miserable!'

'Then you don't think—? But I don't know, I'm not clever, Orme—you *are*, you know!'

'Am I?' said Orme bitterly. 'I have been very clever to-day—I've done for myself with Miss Chevening!'

'I'm sorry, old chap,' said Hotham, with sufficient sympathy. 'Perhaps if—if you try your luck again later—don't you think?'

'It wasn't that—never mind what it was—but I shall never have the chance of trying my luck at all now.'

'Well, you know,' said Guy, with a mistaken attempt at consolation, 'between ourselves, she's a deuced pretty girl and all that—but I never took to her myself; I'm not sure you're not well out of it on the—'

Orme threw off his friend's arm. 'You mean well, I dare say,' he said grimly; 'but if you have any more

comfort of that peculiar kind to offer me, I shall walk home on the other side of the street. If you *must* talk, talk of something you understand, for Heaven's sake!'

Guy whistled and walked on in silence, rather offended, though he ended by making allowances for his friend's state of mind. 'And, by gad!' he reflected, 'he may say what he likes—but I'm not so far wrong! *I* shouldn't like to marry that girl, I know; now *Ida*—'

And here he became reabsorbed in an attempt to convince himself that his self-distrust was after all without sufficient foundation. 'She wasn't bored *all* the time, anyway!' he told himself, with reviving spirits.

CHAPTER VI

IN A BALCONY

On pardonne tant que l'on aime.—*La Rochefoucauld.*

THE Sunday which followed seemed to Orme the most miserable day he had ever spent in his life. He did not, as he had done on one or two occasions of late, accompany Guy to the fashionable church on the other side of the Park which Mrs. Chadwick and her daughters attended, nor did he appear at the 'Parade' afterwards. It was a fine hot June Sunday, the parks and main thoroughfares were crowded, but Orme carefully kept away from any places where there was any prospect of seeing Miss Chevening—he had good reason for his avoidance now, whatever had been the case before. Instead, he wandered, without caring where, down airless back streets where tired women sat listlessly behind their dusty window-panes, through decorous squares, and along roads alive with Sunday traffic, Salvationists, street preachers, Socialists, pleasure-seekers —all of whom he found himself regarding with a sick hatred. And ever at the bottom of his thoughts was the maddening recollection of yesterday; his speech—that priggish, self-righteous speech—never to be re-

called—what red-hot twinges of impatient misery he felt at the memory of it! And Margot, as she defended herself, would he never forget the strange loveliness of her pale indignant face as he had seen it there against the green and saffron sky? What an incredible fool he had been! Would it be of any use to write to her—to put before her all that the withdrawal of her friendship would mean to him? His worldly wisdom saved him from yielding to such an impulse as that. He must wait, that was all, until he met her again and knew whether her resentment was really incapable of being appeased. But it was this forced inaction, this sensation of utter powerlessness to do anything to help his own cause that was so tormenting. And so all that brilliant Sunday his mind revolved in the same dreary round, like a caged squirrel. Fortunately for him, this extreme dejection could not endure beyond that one day; with the morning came the distraction of his ordinary professional cares, to which even Miss Cheveningand her just displeasure had temporarily to give place. And in a shorter time than he could have anticipated he had brought himself to a philosophical—though very far from cheerful—resignation. If he could not hope for her love—and that, he was now convinced, had never been anything but the wildest dream—did it matter so much that he must go without her friendship? What was her friendship for him but a mockery, if she could never give him more? He had only wrecked his chances of happiness a little prematurely—it must have come at some time.

All of which philosophy was of course instantly vanquished by a note which came to him from Mrs. Antrobus before many days had gone by. It was merely an invitation to an *impromptu* dinner—'a very small party,' apologies for short notice, and so forth. Should he go? There was more than a chance that that small party would turn out to include Miss Chevening. If so, she would assuredly find the means of settling all his doubts one way or the other. But if she proved implacable—what a protracted ordeal that dinner would be, to be close to her and meet only subdued hostility in her eyes—was it wise to submit himself to that? Wise or unwise, he would risk it—perhaps she would not be there after all: he discovered that Guy had received no invitation, which was some ground for inferring that Ida Chevening, at least, was not to be one of his aunt's guests on that particular occasion. It was hardly likely that the elder sister had been asked alone—no, he might go in perfect security that he would not be called upon to endure the ordeal of meeting her that evening.

Having arrived at these conclusions, it was strange, perhaps, that his heart should beat so much more quickly than usual, and that he should have that curious sensation that was neither hope nor apprehension, but something compounded of both, as he was taken up in the lift to the floor in Albert Hall Mansions on which was Mrs. Antrobus's flat.

He was a little before his time, which happened to be an earlier hour than usual, and he found his hostess

alone when he entered the drawing-room. 'That's right,' she said approvingly; 'I like my young men to be punctual. I hope you understand I have scarcely anyone to meet you? So difficult to get people at short notice just now! I've had two disappointments as it is.' (Orme was wondering whether Margot was one of them, and whether he was more glad or sorry.) 'Now I'll tell you who *are* coming. There's a Mrs. Maberly, she's a widow, and rather an invalid—and likes it. I met her abroad, she's a great traveller, I believe, never settles anywhere. Then there's her brother, a Mr. Langrish, he has some appointment in Japan—Yokohama, I think it is—but he's home on leave just now. According to his sister, he's everything that's delightful, though I confess I've not discovered it for myself as yet. Oh, and there's one other—Miss Chevening. I found out quite by accident that she was going to be all alone this evening, so I wrote off and secured her. Mr. Langrish is by way of being a great admirer of pretty faces,' said the old lady, as if this were a somewhat eccentric and unusual taste, 'and I thought I'd show him quite *the* loveliest person of my acquaintance. Don't you agree with me?—but I needn't ask you that. By the way, I quite thought you were all in the train somewhere that Saturday till we got to Paddington and I couldn't see you anywhere. I'd promised that girl solemnly she should be back in time for her party, and I was so flurried I couldn't think about anything else. But of course I didn't worry myself—I knew those two young ladies would be all

right under your care, and I dare say,' she added, with a twinkle in her eye, 'that neither of you young men objected to waiting a little. But mind, I can't allow you to monopolise pretty Miss Margot to-night—do you hear?'

Orme smiled ruefully enough. He was thinking that there was small danger of that. But at least he would see her again. At any moment she might enter. He could picture exactly how she would come in with her small, stately head held well up, and her clear eyes shining—and presently she would see him, and what would she do then? There his second-sight was at fault, and indeed it seems sometimes as if Fate had the same dislike as a stammerer to being anticipated even in the most obvious conclusion, and will go out of her way to avoid accepting a hint. At all events that mental picture of Orme's, which it seemed so absolutely safe to draw, was not realised that evening. The electric bell sounded outside, and sent an absolutely superfluous thrill through him, for it proved to be only Mrs. Maberly and her brother who were announced. She was tall and drooping, with the mannered sweetness and plaintive languor of a person who wishes it understood that it is nothing but principle which keeps her from expiring. 'How do you *do*, dear Mrs. Antrobus?' she said mournfully. 'I quite despaired of coming to you—such a fatiguing morning; I've been positively fit for nothing ever since—I've been helping a friend to choose an umbrella!'

'My sister,' explained Mr. Langrish, 'attacks these problems in a conscientious spirit.'

'Oh, she begged me to go with her, poor thing!' said Mrs. Maberly; 'not that I was of much use—for they opened such hosts of them that I got quite confused at last.' Mr. Langrish was some years older than his sister, and looked about forty-five; like her, he had good features, but his faded eyes and the sardonic lines about his mouth gave Orme a disagreeable impression.

They stood there for some little time, exchanging the makeshift conversation that precedes the announcement of dinner, and gradually Orme began to have an ominous conviction that Margot was not coming. It was long past the hour, but she failed to make that entrance he had pictured, and at last the hostess lost patience. 'I *was* expecting somebody else,' she said, as she rang the bell, 'but it's really no use waiting any longer—she won't come now! Something must have prevented her, or she forgot, or made a mistake in the day—it's really very naughty of her.'

Mr. Langrish seemed indifferent on the subject so long as dinner was not to be delayed, but Orme took Mrs. Maberly in with a heavy heart. She would not come. Mrs. Antrobus's acceptance of the fact seemed to have made it final, and he thought he knew why Miss Chevening preferred to break her engagement—she had found out or suspected that he was to be there! So he crumbled the bread of affliction as he sat there, opposite the empty chair where she should have been, and soup, fish, and wine had all the same tastelessness.

And then suddenly the bell rang at last; he tried to keep down the rising hope—it was the servant with the note of apology—and yet no, it was no manservant's voice he heard in the anteroom. 'Why, there she is after all!' cried Mrs. Antrobus, and rose to upbraid and bring in the delinquent. And then Margot's clear voice could be heard—she had mistaken the hour, that was the very commonplace explanation of what his egotism had construed as fatal. Angry or indifferent—what mattered now she had come? And presently Miss Chevening entered, looking meeker under the sense of wrongdoing, but with her usual air of pretty composure. 'And you and Mr. Orme already know one another,' Mrs. Antrobus had added, after mentioning the names of the other guests. 'We have—met before,' she had replied, with a smile which told him nothing, though, as he might have known, she was not likely to betray her feelings in any conspicuous manner just then.

She seemed to have brought new life and animation into the party, which had decidedly been in need of some stimulus. Mr. Langrish's pale eyes lighted up, and he exerted himself as her neighbour to be worthy of his unexpected good luck. He could be amusing in his cool, cynical way when he thought it worth the trouble, as he evidently did now, and Miss Chevening was willing to be pleased.

Orme observed her furtively as she sat opposite; she was wearing black that evening, some soft gauzy material with half sleeves of delicate lace; there was a spray of scarlet flowers at her breast, a small diamond

star scintillated in her hair, as she turned her head to listen to Langrish's somewhat acrid pleasantries.

Once more Orme could look upon her and admire and love her with a love that had no tormenting misgivings—but it was too late; he had wronged her past all hope of forgiveness, and it was a greater distance that separated them now than that daintily arranged table.

With so small a party the conversation was necessarily more or less general, and she could hardly have avoided speaking to him from time to time without making it obvious. And as she clearly had no intention of this, he had to bear his part—to reply to the careless remarks she made to him, and address her on occasions, without betraying to anyone but her that he was not misled by the unreality of it all.

For of course he knew that she had not forgotten, even if it suited her to appear to do so for the present; she would show him how far she was from forgetting when her opportunity came, unless she intended to adopt this indifferent treatment of him always in the future.

That he would *not* endure—it would be too maddening; it should be either all or nothing—he would tell her so and leave it to her to decide.

All this was passing in his mind while he was listening to Mrs. Maberly, who was confiding to him her difficulties in engaging suitable companions. 'I must have a cheerful person about me,' she was saying mournfully; 'I am so fond of cheerfulness, and that is such a rare thing in these days. It's quite delightful

to me to meet anyone fresh and bright—like your opposite neighbour for instance,' she went on, lowering her voice—'and such a lovely face, too! I don't suppose she has ever known what care and suffering are, and it's so good for one to come across young people like that now and then. I'm so glad for my brother to have seen her—I assure you I can scarcely believe he's the same person! But I was telling you about companions: you wouldn't believe what trouble I've had with them! I always make a point of engaging some one in—in one's own position in life, you know, and treating her as a personal friend; but they are so tiresome, always fancying themselves slighted or something ridiculous of the sort, and in travelling they're worse than useless; the last one I had expected *me* to take the tickets, and keep the seats, and do everything. And when we were at Homburg, if I met any friends I knew and she was with me, she never thought of walking on, she would hang about, and then sulk because I didn't introduce her! I suppose you don't happen to know any nice cheerful girl who is willing to go out as a companion? My present companion mopes all day long, and I really can *not* bear it, my nerves are not strong enough—as I said before, cheerfulness is absolutely a necessity to me!'

Orme had to confess his inability to recommend any candidate for what he privately thought might prove a somewhat exacting post, and so Mrs. Maberly meandered on in a description of her Continental wanderings, from which it appeared that she had been at the point of

death at every health resort in Europe, and had been carried insensible through all the finest scenery.

He had only to listen and commiserate at the proper moments, while at the same time not one of Margot's words or gestures escaped him, as she talked to Langrish and Mrs. Antrobus, with a gaiety that seemed spontaneous enough and was certainly charming.

The ladies rose, and Orme and Langrish were left to improve their acquaintance.

'As we've got leave to smoke,' said Langrish, 'I'm going to take Mrs. Antrobus at her word, and have a cigarette. Worst of women's dinners is, they will *not* keep cigars—though perhaps that's just as well. If they gave you one it would be sure to be the sort of brand you get for knocking down a cocoa-nut! It's something to be allowed to smoke at all. You *do* smoke? Try one of these.—You won't be tempted, eh? Just as you please—*I* shall.'

Orme declined, though he was very far from despising that solace at other times; a cigarette is not a very crushing obligation, and yet he did not wish to be indebted, even to this trifling extent, to this man. Besides, he felt that Miss Chevening's fastidiousness might lead her to question the sincerity of a penitence flavoured with recent tobacco.

'I suppose,' said Langrish, lazily adapting himself to his chair, 'you come here pretty often, eh?'

'I have only known Mrs. Antrobus a few months,' said Orme. 'I have dined here before, yes.'

'And, if I heard rightly, this is not the first time

you've met that extremely charming young lady who seems to have somewhat vague notions of time.'

'No, it's not,' Orme said, feeling unreasonably averse to hearing Margot discussed by this sallow and *blasé* stranger.

'I've been away from England so long, I'm out of it all. Who is the lady?—for as usual I didn't succeed in catching her name.'

Orme informed him shortly. 'And I suppose she's one of the great catches this season—an heiress, and so on.'

'I've no reason to believe so—but I really know nothing about it.'

'Heiress or no heiress, she won't be allowed to remain Miss Chevening long with that face, I should say.' He was watching Orme's face narrowly as he made this supposition with an overdone carelessness.

'Most probably not,' Orme agreed, in no very encouraging tone.

'Ah,' said Langrish, with a certain air of relief, 'you feel no interest in the question, or you wouldn't speak like that. When a man comes to my age,' and he gave an awkward little laugh which seemed to invite a protest, 'he finds himself a looker-on by necessity as well as choice. I used to hold, as very likely you do now, that no woman was worth sacrificing one's liberty for. I don't say I was wrong now, and yet if I had had the luck to meet—well, a girl like this Miss What's-her-name, when I was younger, I fancy I should have been tempted to alter my opinion. I don't know—any

way, it's too late to speculate about it now. It's some fellow of her own generation that she's destined to make happy—or confoundedly miserable, as the case may be—and she looks as if she was capable of doing both, probably has done both already more than once! It would be interesting to follow the career of a girl like that as a dispassionate observer, and see what she makes of it. I pity the man who marries her without mastering her—she'd lead him a dog's life; and yet, after all, I dare say she would be kind to her dog if he behaved himself!'

He was meditating aloud as he regarded his half-smoked cigarette with lack-lustre eyes. When a professed cynic does indulge in sentiment, he seldom does it by halves, and Langrish was at once a pathetic as well as a slightly absurd spectacle in his evident inability to conceal the impression Miss Chevening had made upon his experienced heart. Whether it was fellow-feeling or a consciousness that, desperate as his own case was, his companion's was even more hopeless, Orme found himself disliking him less, though he did not allow himself on that account to be drawn into any speculations concerning Miss Chevening's future.

And soon, after a few desultory remarks on other subjects, Langrish threw down his cigarette, and, much to Orme's relief, proposed that they should go into the drawing-room.

The last flush of sunset had died out as they sat at table, and the lamps were being lighted as they came in. Both men's eyes explored the shadows beyond in

search of the same figure, and both faces fell the next moment—there was no Miss Chevening there. Orme felt that his ill-luck had pursued him; she had gone on to some other party no doubt, perhaps she had even invented another engagement; she must have slipped away while Langrish was discussing her over that eternal cigarette of his!

'Oswald, dear,' said Mrs. Maberly, 'come here a moment—I want you. I've been having such a long talk with that Miss Chevening, and she tells me'—the name had the effect of rousing Langrish to an ultra-fraternal promptness of attention; the next best thing to talking to his late neighbour was hearing all about her, which he settled himself to do accordingly.

Mrs. Antrobus came up to Orme, who made a really gallant effort to appear as if he was unconscious that anyone was missing.

'It won't do!' she said; 'I know whom you are looking round for—now; don't protest in that hypocritical manner; you're thinking what a silly old woman I must be to let my pretty guest run away at the beginning of the evening. It's hard on you, I must say, because you were really very good at dinner. *I* noticed. And now you shall have your reward. Will you take this shawl and ask Miss Chevening to be good enough to put it on—to please me? If you step through that window on to the balcony, you will find her there. Don't trouble to entertain me, I've my other guests to look after—get away with you.'

She dismissed him with a nod full of good-humoured

intelligence, though she really knew nothing of the real case. She had been told by her nephew that Orme was an admirer of Miss Chevening; she liked them both, and liked match-making even better, so, as she could afford to be unworldly in other people's affairs, she had made up her mind that the young man should have his chance at all events, though she was completely in he dark as to Margot's own sentiments.

Whatever came of it, Mrs. Antrobus would have something romantic to think of, and it would be particularly interesting if the affair should be settled, in either sense, on her own balcony. How Margot's mother might regard such an engagement—supposing that were to be the result—was not a matter which gave Mrs. Antrobus any concern whatever. Mrs. Chadwick was doing her best to secure Guy for her younger daughter, and, though the old lady had rather helped than hindered this end it was because she had been talked over by her nephew, and not because she regarded Ida as an ideal match for him in any respect. So she felt the more at liberty to treat any projects the mother might have for Margot with indifference.

And thus it came about that Nugent was, after all, afforded the opportunity he sought—though with a very different object from that his hostess attributed to him, for he stepped out upon the balcony, knowing well that a lover's character would be the very last in which Miss Chevening would tolerate him, and determined to force her to declare the scorn and hatred she must be feeling.

She was sitting at an angle of the balcony, looking down upon a spectacle that had not had time as yet to lose the attraction of novelty. It was the year of one of the most popular and successful of the short-lived series of Exhibitions that formed the delight of all Londoners who were not inhabitants of South Kensington. The Metropolis was just discovering, with a pleased surprise, that it was as capable as others of enjoying itself in the open air, and the summer, for once, permitted this to be demonstrated night after night with impunity.

On a lovely evening such as this was, the scene, from a height at which its least pleasing features were blurred or lost, had a strange and almost magical beauty. Immediately below was the great conservatory, filled with mild pearly radiance and outlined without in points of ruddier flame; coloured stars twinkled amidst the dusty foliage of the poplars and plane-trees; painted lanterns swayed, like strings of Aladdin's jewels, in the night air; behind the black trees, a column of sparkling water shot up, changing hue every instant in the ray of electric light which travelled at times over a portion of the vast Hall hard by, bringing its decorated frieze and the ridged glass of its dome into startling prominence. And from below, as an undercurrent to the strains of dance-music from the kiosks, came up the confused tramping stir of humanity, that densely packed mass of black and grey, which from the incessant pipe-lighting, resembled burning tinder. Over it all, against a warm greenish sky, the moon hung in a mellow haze,

serenely unconscious of its scientific substitute—the monster electric light that poured down crude insistent beams from its ugly iron mast; viewed at close quarters, the gathering was commonplace and vulgar enough no doubt, but at a distance only very superior persons would deny its picturesque effect.

Not that Margot was thinking of that at the moment, though the view from the balcony had been her avowed motive of coming out. She wanted to be alone and think, and the subject of her reflections was Nugent Orme. She was angry with him—of course she was angry with him—for daring to speak as he did; she did not want to forgive him just yet—but something in his manner during that dinner had given her a new uneasiness. What if he had changed his mind once more?—what if he no longer wanted to be forgiven? She had been observing him, even when she seemed most attentive to her neighbour's remarks, and she had seen no signs of anxiety or penitence; he had answered her no further than was inevitable when she spoke, but quite freely and naturally, as if he were alike indifferent whether she was gracious or not, and towards the end there had been something stern and determined in the way in which he had concentrated his whole attention on Mrs. Maberly. The idea that he—her friend, the one man she knew whose opinion she respected—was content to drift away from her for good and all was insupportable, and yet, if he did not come to seek her now, she would know that this was so—he had reconsidered, and he condemned her!

And then, as she was trying to make herself accept this, she became aware that some one had come out upon the balcony—she would not look round, lest it should not be he. It was Nugent—at least he was not indifferent then! Though she would not let him see the satisfaction she felt, perhaps she was perverse enough to feel a revival of her original displeasure.

'Is it you?' she exclaimed, with an accent of cool surprise.

'I was sent by Mrs. Antrobus,' he exclaimed. 'She wished you to put on this.'

He had not come of his own accord, then—he had been sent! 'I detest shawls!' she said petulantly. 'I mean, it is very kind of Mrs. Antrobus, but I am perfectly warm here.'

'Then I am to take it back?' Immediately after saying this he regretted it, but it was too late.

'If you will.'

For a moment Orme was tempted to take her at her word and go, but he could not leave her until he had said what was in his mind.

'I will take it back presently,' he said, 'not now.'

'Why not?—I thought that was what you came for.'

'It was not all I came for—I came to say something to you.'

Her heart sank at his tone. 'I don't want to hear,' she said faintly.

'I will be as short as I can, but you must hear me. When we last met, I asked you to give me some assur-

ance that I might still consider myself your friend. You refused to answer me at the time, you remember?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Well?'

'It is unnecessary now,' he continued. 'I know that any real friendship between us is impossible. I will save you the trouble of saying so yourself. And I am not content, if you are, to go through the mockery of friendship you chose to adopt this evening. I dare-say it was at least as disagreeable to you—very likely you thought it best under the circumstances; I only know that I will never, if I can help it, put you to such a necessity again. I would rather that you cut me whenever we met than suffer again as I have to-night! Anything is better than keeping up a form that is dead—I ask you to spare me that punishment in future.'

He spoke wildly, unreasonably, hardly knowing what he wanted, or meaning what he said, in his despairing impatience to anticipate the worst. Margot sat silent, looking down with unseeing eyes on the lights and the moving throng below. At last she said in a strangely subdued and even anxious way: 'When you say our friendship is dead, impossible—is it because of—of anything *I* have done?'

'Did you not make it clear enough just now that you could not forgive me?'

'And you were not thinking about—about Allen when you said that?'

'Allen!—what is Allen to me now, except that—Is it possible,' he cried, 'that I have not offended you beyond all hope?—can you honestly, freely, forgive me?'

'I was angry that you should believe I was quite so bad as that,' she said in a low voice; 'but I think I was even more hurt—you were so severe, you did not even wait to hear my version!'

'I know,' he said remorsefully. 'Do you think I don't hate myself for it all? I was blind to believe that you could possibly be capable of cruelty.'

She looked at him with great serious eyes. 'But if I *was* cruel, a little cruel?' she said.

'What you did was not cruel—justice is not cruelty—and you acted, as far as you could tell then, for the best for all—even for him. No, you are right to be angry; right, even if you can't bring yourself to pardon me. It was a monstrous charge to think of bringing against you, and yet I brought it. But somehow I ask you now, though I did not dare a few minutes ago, to have more charity than I showed, to believe how deeply ashamed I feel of having wronged you, and forgive me.'

'Forgive you?' she repeated softly; 'and some day you will say the same things to me again—is it worth while?'

'Now you are really cruel!' he exclaimed.

She rose and stood there facing him, with eyes half resentful, half reproachful. 'But it is true,' she said. 'You can't change your nature all at once. Have I ever done right in your eyes since we first knew one another? You have always found fault and scolded me for what I did or did not do. When you said nothing I knew you were disapproving of me still. Is that

friendship? Ought not one's friends to be a little blind to one's faults, to—to believe in one a little—even though one may do wrong things? I think so.'

He could not answer for the moment; she looked so fair and spirited and innocent, her loveliness gaining a mysterious glamour in the strange glow of reflected light that reached the balcony where they two were alone, high above and apart from the ordinary world. A dreamy waltz refrain floated up to the balcony, filling up the pause.

'No,' she continued, in a tone of conviction that was touched with sadness; 'you don't really believe in me—you never will!'

Then he found words—words that came from him in spite of himself, and that he had not thought of uttering till that instant. 'I not believe in you!' he cried; 'is it possible that you think that—that you have not guessed—not seen? You won't trust me even as a friend, and yet—I must say it now, though you will send me away when I have done—it is more than that I would be if I could! Margot, I love you. I know it is mad—worse than mad—to tell you so now, but I must. I must! . . . I will not have you unjust to me!'

He caught the fair hand which rested on the balcony and which she did not withdraw, even though he was hurting it unconsciously in the energy of his strong grasp.

'Speak to me!' he pleaded eagerly. 'You are not angry! Tell me you are not angry!'

She turned her face to him again; her eyes were

very bright, and a tremulous smile played about her lips. 'I—I don't think I am angry,' she said slowly.

Even then he could not understand that this great happiness could really be his. 'Margot—tell me,' he said, 'is it true—you don't hate me?'

'I never hated you,' she replied, almost in a whisper.

'But do you love me? Enough to be my wife?'

She let him draw her towards him till her proud head was nestling against his shoulder. 'If you care to take me,' she said with a little low laugh full of content—and he understood at last.

Neither had spoken for some little time: he was still wondering if this were not a dream. 'How pretty it all looks down there, doesn't it?' said Margot at last (when she first came out she had found it all garish and bustling). 'I wonder if there are people in that crowd as happy as we are! Somehow I feel as if it was a good omen, having all that brightness about us.'

While she spoke the scene suddenly changed, the lights died out everywhere, leaving the glass halls grey and cold and the trees mere shadowy masses of black; a great bell began to clang harshly; shrieks and screams and boisterous calls came up from the crowd of pleasure-seekers as they hustled towards the exits.

Margot gave a little shiver. 'I wish they had not done that just then!' she said. 'How foolish of me to mind! Only, Nugent, I want you to promise me something. I know I am not good—(no, don't interrupt, I know best)—only *promise* not to think horrid things of me again—be satisfied with me as I am!'

'I shall not promise,' he said, 'because there is no need for it now. If I did not know it before, I know now that you are far too lovely and good for a poor fellow like me!'

She smiled. 'If you will only think so always. And now, hadn't we better take Mrs. Antrobus's shawl back? I shall like Indian shawls after to-night.'

CHAPTER VII

MRS. ANTROBUS AS A DIPLOMATIST

Even Margot felt a little diffidence in facing those three pair of eyes in the drawing-room, after the change in her life that had taken place during the short absence on the balcony. There was nothing awkward or self-conscious in her manner, however, as she came in, though, to an observer of any penetration, the glory of sudden happiness which had not had time to fade out of her eyes, and the dreamy gentleness of her smile, would have told a tale. In Orme's bearing, as he followed, the position of affairs was less poetically perceptible; the least demonstrative of men can scarcely disguise the fact of being a recently accepted lover, and avoid a certain indescribable air of shamefaced triumph; if he does, he is apt to err on the side of an unconsciousness fatally overdone.

One glance was sufficient for Mrs. Antrobus, though she contented herself with saying, 'So you haven't rejected the shawl, my dear? I hoped Mr. Orme would succeed in persuading you.'

'He did,' replied Margot demurely. 'Thank you so much for sending it out to me.'

Mrs. Maberly, who would hardly have noticed anything, if it had all occurred under her very eyes, remarked upon the protection an Indian shawl was, and the danger of trusting oneself at any season on a balcony without one. 'Ah, well,' said Mrs. Antrobus, 'I hope that, thanks to my foresight, Miss Chevening will not regret having trusted herself on *my* balcony.'

Private reasons made Langrish keener of sight than his sister; after such a brilliant beginning, his evening, poor man, had had a dismal ending. He had been in torments for the last three-quarters of an hour, and it is to be feared his hostess was not incapable of enjoying his sufferings. Too late, he had discovered that Miss Chevening had not left after all; she was outside—and that young fellow with the square saturnine face was boring her with his conversation. The ingenious arts he used to induce Mrs. Antrobus to brave the night air, his perseverance in speaking of the view there must be from her windows, his industriously laboured allusions to the Exhibition, were almost pathetic—but the old lady proved incredibly dull of comprehension. She sat like a rock, and gave him no excuse for leaving his seat for a moment, while his sister, who might have helped him, was too indolent and too much afraid of neuralgia to second his manœuvres. And now, though he did not guess the truth, he did begin to have a dim suspicion that this reserved young barrister fellow might possibly not be such a determined misogamist. He did his best to make up for lost time by enjoy-

ing what he could of Miss Chevening's conversation, and he found her more charming and delightful than ever, more disposed to agree with him, easier to amuse. There was a new sweetness in her smile, an added sparkle in her eyes, which, when his sister signified an untimely desire to go, sent the poor man away with a dull pain in a heart that had been long a stranger to such symptoms, and a wonder whether, after all, women were particular about a man's age.

Mrs. Maberly had been pouring out her sorrows to Margot, to whom she had taken a languid fancy, much in the same strain as Nugent had been treated to at dinner; she left her with an urgent invitation to come and see her at the Langham, where she would be until she went abroad in August, an invitation, however, of which Margot had the smallest possible intention of availing herself.

'You are not going to desert me too?' said Mrs. Antrobus to Margot, who was holding out her hand in farewell. 'I was hoping for a little chat, now those tiresome people are gone.'

But Margot had an intuition of what the old lady was dying to hear, and not even gratitude could bring her to talk of it so soon. 'Another day,' she murmured with a pretty, caressing, pleading gesture; 'my maid must be waiting. I promised not to be late—*please* let me go now.'

'Very well,' was the reply. 'I daresay Mr. Orme will see you to your carriage.'

In the ante-room was Susan, on a chair, with that pleasing air of undeserved martyrdom which she was wont to adopt on such occasions. Orme noticed that her mistress's gracious friendliness had absolutely no effect upon the girl. As they went down the stairs (for he did not feel called upon to suggest the lift), Susan following, he whispered, 'Shall I see you to-morrow when I come to speak to Mrs. Chadwick?'

Margot started. 'We shall have to tell mother!' she said (how dear the 'we' was to him). 'I—I had forgotten that—and what will she say?'

Orme himself had a very uncomfortable prevision of what Mrs. Chadwick would say.

'Whatever she says,' he replied, 'promise me, Margot, you won't let yourself be talked into—into giving me up.'

'You want me to promise that?' she said in a hurt tone. '*Already!* I told you you didn't believe in me. Whatever I am—I can be true—Nugent.'

'I do believe in you, darling,' he said passionately. 'I am afraid of nothing your mother can do—we shall be happy some day, in spite of her.'

'I thought we were happy now,' she answered softly, and Orme accepted the rebuke, not without a passing irritation at the remembrance of the presence of Susan a few steps behind; he thought she might have had the sense to go down by the lift!

As it was, he had to control his rapture, and put Margot and her maid into the hansom, with as matter-of-fact an air as he could assume, though he did not

succeed, even thus, in disarming Miss Susan's suspicions.

'To-morrow!' she repeated to herself as they drove away—'and what is there about to-morrow so particular that he should look like that? Ah, you deceiving cat! *I* can see you a-smiling to yourself in the corner there. *I* know what's up between you and him—and a deal too good he is for a heartless piece like you. But, if I know missis, you'll smile the other side of your face to-morrow, and I shan't be sorry for one!'

'I 'ope you've 'ad a pleasant evenin', miss?' she said aloud.

Margot came out of her reverie. 'Did you speak, Susan? Oh, thank you—yes, it was pleasant,' she said gently, without any of the *hauteur* which she could not always repress in speaking to Susan, her dislike to whom she tried in vain to overcome. The girl had given no cause for complaint since she had been with them; she was not unkind to Lettice, she was a clever and attentive maid, but it was always an effort to Margot, until that evening, to submit to her services; she had a constant sense that she would be impertinent if she dared.

To-night, however, Miss Chevening was in charity with all the world.

What were Orme's thoughts as he walked home alone under the stars? His heart was full of a passion of wondering gratitude—a happiness so intense as to terrify him into some approach to soberness, with that

odd but universal impression that it is not safe to be so happy. She loved him—after all, in spite of all! How strange and far away now seemed all the hopes and fears with which he had gone to that dinner, with only a suspicion that she might be there! And how little could he have hoped for this!—a reconciliation, a half-hearted readmittance to friendship, had seemed an impossible piece of good-fortune then. How wonderful it all was! How he loved even his past misery for the sake of its sequel! He knew Margot so little still—but he felt now that there were no discoveries in her nature that could make her less lovable in his eyes. She was perfect, more perfect for her very imperfections, which he had once in his folly and presumption so grossly exaggerated. When he thought now that he had been suspecting her of an act of cold-blooded cruelty— But why should he think of it? she had explained everything—there was an implied disloyalty in the very recollection of it.

Was there another motive beneath this resolve to forget?—had he a secret disinclination to examine her denial too closely—an uneasy fear of the doubts which might, for all he could tell, be in a state of suspended animation?

If he had, he was not aware of it; he had done with doubt for ever, he believed in her implicitly, in her essential womanliness and sweetness, her truthfulness and candour; to that faith he would cling—for what remained for him now if he lost hold for an instant?

There no was conscious effort in this belief; but, if

it is true that a really robust faith shrinks from no inquiry, dreads no self-questioning, then Orme's belief in Margot fell short of the standard of perfect soundness, passionately as—had it been suggested to him—he would have denied the imputation.

Early the next afternoon Mrs. Antrobus received a visit from Mrs. Chadwick; she came alone, and her expression as she sat down showed that she considered herself an aggrieved person. 'No,' she said, in reply to the conventional inquiries, 'I am *not* well—how could I be, after such a shock as I received last night?'

'Dear me! not a carriage accident, I hope?' said Mrs. Antrobus. 'London coachmen are so shockingly intemperate! I remember having to discharge one because he drew up solemnly at eleven o'clock at night at the Marble Arch, which he insisted was my front door.'

'My coachman is a blue-ribbonist,' returned Mrs. Chadwick stiffly, 'and I have had no accident of that kind—I wish it had been no worse than that. The shock came from my eldest daughter, who came into my room the moment I got home last night, and told me something which grieved and surprised me more than I can say. It seems that Mr. Orme took advantage of meeting her under your protection to—actually to propose to her, and, what is worse, I fear from all I can gather, that she did not discourage him as unmistakably as she ought to have done!'

'That sounds very shocking and immoral,' said Mrs. Antrobus, 'at least, if, as I suppose, Miss Margot happens to be already engaged to somebody else?'

Mrs. Chadwick was in a state of polite fury at not being able to make the old lady understand her feelings. 'Surely,' she said sharply, 'it is bad enough as it is, without any complications of that kind! My daughter has had more than one exceptionally good offer, down at Gorsecombe and since we came to town, but she has persistently refused to listen to one of them.'

'Then I fail to see why she should not listen to my young friend, if she likes him.'

'Oh, you *must* see—I'm sure you *do* see in your own heart!—a young man like this Mr. Orme—the son of the vicar in our own village at home——'

'Hoity-toity!' was the expression Mrs. Antrobus would have liked to use just then, only one cannot say 'hoity-toity' without some infringement of the strict etiquette of afternoon calls. So she said instead, 'I was not aware that to be the son of even a country vicar is to be outside the pale of society.'

'It is not a question of the pale of society at all. Mr. Orme, the father, is an excellent man and much respected in the parish. As far as I know, his son is a worthy young man enough, but not a match for my daughter Margot; with her beauty and the opportunities I am now in a position to give her, she might marry anybody!'

'Then why not Mr. Orme?—but I understand you.

And yet, for the life of me, my dear, I don't know in what his inferiority consists—if you'll pardon my plain-speaking. A man can but be a gentleman, and you'll hardly deny that he is that, while your pretty Margot, charming as she is (and no one can admire her more than I do), is a colonel's daughter. Where is the glaring inequality?'

'Where?' exclaimed Mrs. Chadwick; 'you must have very extraordinary views to ask such a question. In his means, in his prospects, in the position he could give her!'

'Of course—*now* I understand. Your daughters are heiresses,' said Mrs. Antrobus, perfectly aware they were nothing of the kind.

'I did not say so,' retorted Mrs. Chadwick; 'they have nothing of their own, poor girls, though I have no doubt that, provided they made suitable matches, their step-father would behave generously towards them.'

'Then we come back in a circle again,' persisted the old lady; 'why isn't Mr. Orme a suitable match? He's a gentleman, as we both agree, clever, good-looking enough, though he isn't a beauty man—for which you may thank the Lord. As to his means, I've taken the trouble to make inquiries, and I can assure you that he is making a fine income already for a young man of his standing, and from all I can hear, he's likely to be rich and famous enough to satisfy any reasonable ambition in a few years. Upon my word, I don't know what more you want. Is it so easy to make a really brilliant

match for a girl who has nothing but good looks and good birth and breeding? Young men are shy enough of marriage in any case in *my* experience. I must say that, if you take my advice, you will be satisfied with things as they are—I'm sure they might be very much worse.'

'It is so easy to talk in that way!' said Mrs. Chadwick, 'but you are not a mother—you don't see things with a mother's eyes! If you did, I think—yes,' she added, unable to restrain her sense of injury, 'I *do* think you would have been more careful, you would not have allowed things to go on without so much as warning me. I am not reproaching you, dear Mrs. Antrobus—but I *must* feel that you have not been quite—quite considerate to me!'

'Well, I'm not going to defend myself there—I *did* allow it to go on. I'm a sentimental old woman, though you wouldn't think it, to look at me, and I hold that the only true marriages are those of affection. I'd rather see a girl I was fond of in her grave than married to a man for his title or his money. But that's my eccentricity; and after all, you have not told me what you mean to do in this case. As one who takes a decided interest in both parties, I think I've some right to be informed. I suppose you have seen Mr. Orme?'

'No, indeed,' said Mrs. Chadwick, drawing herself up; 'he called to see me this morning at such a ridiculously early hour—nearly eleven—that it was quite impossible to receive him.'

'So you told him to call again, like a tradesman—

very civil treatment, I must say, considering that he probably had to make some sacrifice to call at all just then; but I suppose you will condescend to see him some time, and what will you say to him when you do see him?'

'What *can* I say? I shall tell him that it is out of the question, utterly out of the question—that I can't hear of any sort of an engagement between them—that I trust to him as a gentleman to give up all idea of it.'

'Very pretty! Poor Mr. Orme! he has not lost much by not seeing you this morning, it seems. But now, my dear Mrs. Chadwick, before you quite make up your mind, suppose you listen to me for a little. I don't think you were at all unwilling to let your daughters come to me whenever I asked them. And I fancy you must have had some suspicion that my nephew Guy was, shall we say, attracted by your daughter Ida?'

'If you mean——!' began Mrs. Chadwick, flushing angrily.

'Of course I don't—but listen. I have done what I could to encourage it, to give Ida an opportunity of seeing if she cares for Guy, who is a dear good fellow, and deserves to be happy. I think that, through me, they have met at more places this season than they could have done if I had not chosen to interfere. I don't know, by the way, how far you approve of my proceedings in that respect?'

'How can you ask!' cried her visitor; 'we are all

fond of Guy, and, though I should not dream of dictating to a daughter of mine, and of course I don't know what dear Ida's feelings for him may be——'

'Exactly,' interrupted the old lady unceremoniously, 'you would offer no obstacles; you are fond of Guy, and Guy will have Hawleigh some day, and Ida may be Lady Hotham. Well, I see no particular objection to all that, if it happens. I'm peculiar, as I said, and though Guy is my nephew, I'd rather see him settled and happy with a nice girl he was fond of, even if he never got a penny with her, than turning into a mere man about town—a selfish, extravagant rake, who believes in nothing, and cares for nobody but his precious self.'

'Oh, so would *I*!' put in Mrs. Chadwick emotionally—'far, far rather!'

'We are two such unworldly people, you see; but you mustn't be offended by what I'm going to say: *You* might offer no obstacles, but I'm afraid you would find that they would be less reasonable at Hawleigh. My sister-in-law has an idea that Guy ought to make a very good marriage indeed. I'm afraid that even a commoner's daughter, unless she was extremely rich, would hardly satisfy her— Oh, of course it's very ridiculous and narrow-minded and all that sort of thing, but some mothers *are* like that, my dear Mrs. Chadwick, and we must be prepared for it.'

Mrs. Chadwick sighed and said she found it difficult to believe that any mother would oppose the happiness of her own child from mere ambition.

'Ah, but it is so, I assure you; Lady Adela would look at it very much as you look at Mr. Orme's proposal. But, as to "opposing a son's happiness," why she would tell herself that Guy was too young to know his own mind, that he would soon get over the disappointment, as very likely he would, for even now I'm by no means certain it's more than a passing fancy, or that, without constant opportunities of meeting, it would ever come to anything serious. Well, she would say all that—and, what's more, she would reproach me bitterly for allowing and encouraging it. I dare say I should survive it; and I've some influence with my brother, and even my sister-in-law would not care to quarrel with me—she didn't make me Guy's godmother for nothing. So in time I should get my way, I don't doubt; but, to tell you the truth, I am cured of interfering in other people's concerns.'

'You will not? Oh, my dear Mrs. Antrobus, why do you say so?'

'Because I am unlucky. Aren't you here now to reproach me, because I don't look at marriages with a mother's eyes? I had no business to interfere, and that's the truth of it. I give up Mr. Orme: send him away if you like—you won't offend me, or, I dare say, break naughty Margot's heart past mending. Only, I must be consistent; if it's impertinent to interfere in one case, it's as bad in the other. I shall keep on the safe side in future, and give my dear sister-in-law a hint that a trip round the world would do Master Guy no harm. I think he'd go too.'

'I'm sure, said Mrs. Chadwick with stateliness, 'that you know me too well to think I am a designing or—or a harsh mother with my daughters; I only want to do the best for them I can. And what you tell me about Mr. Orme *does* make a difference. I'd no idea you took so much interest in him, and he really is nice—I always felt that about him.'

'Does that mean that you can put up with him as a son-in-law after all?'

Mrs. Chadwick saw no way out of it; an engagement was highly undesirable, but still there need be no question of marriage for some time yet—it was not as if it was necessarily final. And she could not afford to quarrel with Mrs. Antrobus, for she knew very well that, devoted as Guy seemed to be, he was by no means secure at present, and, without his aunt's countenance, might easily slip through their fingers altogether.

So she said, with a very creditable show of cordiality, 'How can you talk of it in such a way? Of course I shall be delighted, though I may not be altogether pleased, in some respects, to welcome Mr. Orme as one of the family. One thing I must stipulate for—they must not think of marrying at present.'

'They can both wait a little while for that,' said Mrs. Antrobus. 'Well, I'm very glad you take so sensible a view of it, my dear. But I was sure you would.'

'And about dear Guy—for he is really such a favourite of mine!'—began Mrs. Chadwick, as she was rising to go.

'A greater favourite than even Mr. Orme?' put in the old lady grimly. 'Well, what about dear Guy?'

'I was only going to say—I *don't* think a trip round the world would be—would be very——'

'Don't you? no more do I, my dear; make your mind easy—he isn't going—he shall stay and make love to little Miss Ida to both their hearts' content.'

And, comforted by that assurance, Mrs. Chadwick was able to take her departure, leaving Guy's affectionate aunt to enjoy the success of her diplomacy.

CHAPTER VIII

AUTUMN MANŒUVRES

Wait a little, wait a little,
You shall fix a day.—*The Window.*

On his second visit Orme found a more gracious reception than his first abortive attempt to ask Mrs. Chadwick's consent had led him to hope for. She was not particularly cordial even then—there was a resignation in her manner that was scarcely flattering, but she did not oppose an engagement, provided that there should be no mention of marriage at present. Nugent, not having contemplated an immediate marriage, was perfectly content to accept the proviso; it was happiness enough for him to see his love from time to time and enjoy all the privileges of an accepted lover. Margot either was or pretended to be disappointed at so matter-of-fact an ending. 'I thought from mother's manner last night that it was going to be much more exciting than this,' she said playfully; 'all my determination not to give way is quite wasted! I had made up my mind to encounter every kind of opposition, and to prove to you how constant I could be—and now—well, you must admit it is a little tame, Nugent.'

'I can do without the excitement,' he said; 'I can't do without you.'

She shook her head. 'You won't appreciate my society nearly so much now you can have it every day—you will soon begin to disapprove of me again.'

'Margot, you don't really believe that? Won't you ever understand what you are to me?'

'I do think you are fond of me,' she said; 'you think me so much better than I am or ever can be. I believe I am just a little afraid of what you will feel when—when you begin to find me out.'

'Afraid of me!' he cried.

'There are very few people I have ever been afraid of,' she said, 'but I think I might be of you. If you were really angry you would be very severe. After all,' she added, 'I am not sure that that is not one of the things I like best in you, only you must try not to be too severe with me, Nugent. Make up your mind now to be disappointed a little—I wish you would.'

Nugent's protest was practical rather than argumentative, and Lettice, by arriving in the middle of it, caused a certain embarrassment.

'I *did* startle you!' she said. 'Does being engaged always make people as nervous as that?—it must be rather stupid if it does, *I* should think. May I stop? I'll be very quiet, Margot.'

'You needn't be quiet, Lettice,' said her sister; 'I want you to come and speak to your new brother.'

'I don't want any new brother instead of Allen,

thank you,' said Lettice. 'Wherever Allen is, *I've* not left off having him for my brother.'

'Nugent is quite a different kind of brother from poor Allen, Lettice,' said Margot, with a faint line of displeasure showing itself upon her forehead.

'You never did like Allen, did you? I liked him. Shall you like Mr. Orme, do you think?'

'I am going to try,' said Margot.

'Margot is going to marry me some day, Lettice,' said Nugent, 'so you see you and I ought to be friends.

'If you marry her, you'll take her away from us all —*we* want her most! If you would let her stay here, I don't mind being friends, I'll be your sister even—yes, I will really—if you'll promise me you'll never want to marry her. You can be engaged quite well without that, you know—lots of people are.'

'It will be a long time before I leave you, Lettie, so you mustn't begin to worry about that now. And you like Nugent, you know.'

'I like him as a now-and-then visitor,' Lettice admitted, 'if he'll only go on being that.'

But, in spite of this guarded approval, she gradually relaxed under Nugent's advances until she even condescended at parting to invite him, entirely on her own account, to come again soon. 'If you come early in the afternoon,' she said encouragingly, 'you're nearly sure to find *me* at home!'

Ida was never weary of congratulating, wondering, and questioning. 'When did you first begin to fancy

you liked him, Margot? What first made you think he was in love with you? Are you very, very happy? What does it all feel like? I never thought you would care for anybody, somehow. And you *do* care for him? you are quite certain? I am sure he is very nice—*Guy* is so fond of him!'—and she sighed, 'I wonder if Guy and I will ever be like that. He is so strange now, so changed, Margot. He was at that fête last night (I never thanked you for letting mother take me instead of you—thanks, awfully, now, dear), but he hardly spoke to me; do you think he doesn't care for me after all?—he did once, I know! Margot, if he went away now, and nothing ever put things right between us, I think it would kill me. But you are so happy—you have no time to feel for me any more!'

And Margot had to answer and console her as best she might; it made her anxious to see the intensity of Ida's attachment for Guy Hotham, and she dreaded to think of the consequences should he prove to have had no serious intentions.

Orme, at all events, was perfectly happy—if he had not been, he would have been hard to please indeed. He had won the prize—beautiful, proud Margot was his; scarcely a day passed without their meeting, if only for a few minutes, and the prospect of seeing her when his work was over made him less rather than more sensible of the wearisome monotony of much of his labours—the waiting in a stifling court for his case to come on, the conferences and consultations, the drafting of complicated instruments which taxed his ingenuity without exciting

his enthusiasm—all this in some way had ceased to be irksome. And when any occasion came for displaying higher abilities, it seemed to him that he had never been in fuller command of all his powers. He had now a double incentive to ambition, and, so far from distracting or enervating, the thought of Margot inspired and fortified him to do his utmost.

Nor did she fulfil her prediction that she should disenchant him as he came to know her better. Had she been ever so exacting and unreasonable he would still have found her charming, but she made no attempt to abuse her power; she had impressed him once as self-willed and intolerant of anything that interfered with her good pleasure—he found her devoted to Ida, trying as her peevishness was at times. To him, Margot showed a sweet docility which, coming from her, was strangely touching: it seemed as if she found a new and piquant pleasure in submitting her will to another's, and there was a touch of playful exaggeration about this humility of hers that prevented it from being spiritless.

It was happiness that had worked this change in her, for she had never been so happy before; always, till now, a secret discontent with herself and her life had coloured all she did and said. Now that she knew that Nugent loved her, troubles and uneasy recollections were forgotten, he would never call her in question about Allen again—she had silenced all his objections on that score, she had his approval of the course she had taken. The only thought that disturbed her some-

times was that he might come to condemn her once more some day. What if Allen came back and was repulsed by his father— But why meet evil half way? He had not come back, perhaps he never would come back—at least not until Nugent and she were married; he might come then for aught she cared.

It will be seen that Miss Chevening's conscience, in spite of all the arguments she employed to quiet it, still disturbed her for the share she had taken in Allen's banishment. It slumbered mostly, it did not seriously affect her; but time, which softened her step-brother's offences, made her conduct towards him the less excusable in her own eyes, and curiously enough, perhaps, she had never felt this more strongly than after she had vanquished Nugent's condemnation. However, conscience, as some character in a Restoration drama observes, 'is a tender babe,' and certainly has the recommendation of being more easily lulled than most babes. Possibly Margot's self-reproaches did no more than supply a zest to the bliss of loving and being loved, and she was far enough from any real regret that Allen was conveniently lost sight of, if she was not actually capable of hoping that he was no longer alive.

Nugent had of course to write and announce his engagement to Millicent, a task which not even his feelings as a lover could make pleasant. He had not quite forgiven her for so nearly coming between them, and he was conscious, too, that his news would seem to her a confirmation of her fears that he would disregard the warning. Something of these feelings, though he

abstained alike from either reproach or apology, crept into his letter in spite of himself. 'I suppose I must not expect congratulations from you,' he wrote; 'if you choose to consider that this is weakness and infatuation and that I could ever have spoken of love to Margot without having good reason to trust and honour her—why, then you must, and I am sorry, but can't help it. But I think you know me better. She has told me everything—little as I deserved it; and when you have heard the real facts, which I have persuaded her (very much against her will) to let me tell you, I think your sense of fairness will lead you to own that you have been in too great a hurry to be quite charitable' (and here he told her shortly Allen's character and offence, as he had learnt them from Margot's own lips). 'I can't believe, Millicent, that you will be so prejudiced as not to feel some compunction for having misjudged her; now that you know all the circumstances, I won't think, until you oblige me, that you will persist in continuing this estrangement with Margot or show any coldness in receiving her. But if you do, the loss will be yours, not hers, and I need hardly say that any remonstrances or laments you may think fit to make will not have the slightest effect upon me.'

It was not a very politic production, but he was too proud a lover to adopt a more conciliatory tone—it would have been an indignity to his love had he implied that Margot stood in any need of his pleading.

Millicent read the letter at breakfast one brilliant

July morning, while the bees were humming over the flower-beds outside the open windows; she had time to master the contents of the letter unobserved, for her mother was not yet down, and the Vicar had not come in from his before-breakfast stroll round the lawn.

She was wounded rather than angered, as some sisters might have been, by Nugent's tone; he wrote as if he expected to find her unsympathetic, if not hostile, and, what was worse, as if he did not particularly care whether she were so or not, except on Margot's account —he did not even pretend that Margot herself was anxious for a reconciliation.

Was Millicent hostile? He had disregarded her warning, he was going to marry this girl; was it such a mistake? If she had been in Margot's place, and had known Allen to be a dangerous hypocrite, a thief, might she not have determined to have him sent away before he brought some open and indelible disgrace upon the family? No; Millicent felt that she herself would not have had the heart—she would have yielded, have given him, however worthless, one more trial. But she could see that another might act differently, and yet deserve no condemnation.

Why had not Margot told her all this? Poor Millicent could only conclude that she had not thought her friendship worth retaining; or was she too generous to defend herself by blaming another until she was forced to do so? The light way in which she had treated the matter seemed less heartless now—yes, Millicent had been unjust, and her injustice had nearly wrecked her

brother's happiness; was it wonderful that he wrote coldly to her?

She could not think him infatuated or weak, she recognised the strength of his character—he would not have yielded to this love if it cost him respect for himself and her. If Nugent acquitted Margot, she could not deserve blame.

And the conviction of this, humbling as it was, had redeeming points for Millicent. She had admired and loved and looked up to Margot so much, it had gone to her heart to separate from her, to feel that she could not be her friend. And the discovery that she had been wrong was not made grudgingly, as is apt to be the case with less generous natures. Millicent actually bore no resentment against Margot for having been misjudged by her, she was not even jealous of her for having won Nugent's love. She was proud, for his sake; Margot was so lovely, so captivating, it was natural that Nugent should be attracted by her; she was glad now, whatever she had been before, that she was to have such a sister-in-law.

If only they would both forgive her and take her into their hearts as before, she was ready to make any sacrifice of her personal dignity; she owed full reparation, and she would pay it.

So, by the time Mrs. Orme had taken her place behind the silver presentation urn, and the Vicar had decided that he was entitled to come indoors, Millicent was able to tell her news with every sign of satisfaction.

'Miss Chevening, is it?' said her father; 'well, I admire his audacity—one of the loveliest girls I've ever seen. Lucky fellow!'

'I don't see that the luck is all on Nugent's side, really, Cyprian,' said Mrs. Orme. 'I'm not at all sure that Margot Chevening is the girl *I* should have chosen for Nugent.'

'We have never had an opportunity of meeting that ideal young woman yet, my love; and, really, in the meantime Miss Chevening is a very attractive and charming girl. Nugent can put up with her till the other lady appears.'

'I only wish,' sighed Mrs. Orme, 'that her step-father wasn't such a dreadful person.'

'Chadwick? yes; I can't say I care about being more intimate with Chadwick than I can help, particularly if he sticks to his present way of life,' said the Vicar; 'but after all, he's only her step-father; there's no reason why we should see much more of him. Does Nugent say when he intends to set up house, Millie? Shouldn't advise him to do so just yet. I've a notion Miss Margot would be an expensive young lady for a struggling young barrister to start housekeeping with.'

'I don't think Nugent has thought of all that as yet,' said Millicent; 'and indeed, papa, I don't believe Margot's a bit extravagant; you only say so because she always wears such lovely frocks, but they're quite simple ones, really, only so perfectly made!'

'Are they, Millie? I dare say you may not believe it, but I never gave her frocks a thought. I was only

doubting whether, well as Nugent is getting on, he can afford to give her the luxuries she is used to; however, that's his affair,' said the Vicar, with his mouth full of dry toast, 'so long as she will wait for him. Give them both my love and my—ah—blessing when you write, and ask when we're to see them down here.'

'I hope and trust that Nugent has been guided to make a right choice,' said his mother.

'Oh, I dare say she'll have a little money; Chadwick ought to do something for her,' said the more secular-minded Vicar, as he cracked an egg, 'he's rich enough.'

'That was not at all what I meant,' said his wife in a superior manner; 'the money is neither here nor there.'

'It is certainly not *here*, my dear,' retorted the Vicar, who was in reality far more indifferent to such considerations than his wife, 'but, for Nugent's sake, I should not be sorry to hear there was a little there. The angel in the house isn't always quite such an angel in furnished apartments—she'll soon moult—can't keep lovebirds long on chickweed, you know!'

'Cyprian, I *wish* you would not joke on such subjects. I don't like to hear a clergyman making jokes about angels living in lodgings, it doesn't sound reverent or consistent—to me!'

'You didn't understand the allusion, my love; I was referring to Coventry Patmore's Angel,' said the Vicar mildly.

'I don't want to hear about anybody's angel moulting and being kept on chickweed,' said Mrs. Orme. 'I call it profanity.'

So the Vicar contented himself by a comic elevation of his eyebrows in silent appeal to his daughter, and no further reference was made at the time to the engagement.

Millicent wrote a penitent and at the same time gently reproachful letter to Nugent, protesting against his assumption that she would be unwilling to acknowledge her mistake, and assuring him that she fully recognised that she had been wrong. He must forgive her and believe that she had only spoken out of love for him and under a sincere conviction that her statements were true. No one rejoiced more than she did to be able to think that Margot was as lovable as she was lovely, and her only regret was that Margot could not feel enough confidence in her to disabuse her at the time; she ended with warm congratulations and earnest wishes for his happiness.

'So Millicent has written,' said Margot to him; 'I have heard from her too. I didn't know you would tell her all about Allen, Nugent!'

'You gave me leave,' he said.

'Then it was foolish of me. Everybody will know it now. I do hope Millicent won't think it necessary to say any more about it—to me or anybody else.'

'You can trust Millicent—she is not a gossip; but *why* don't you wish her to mention it to you?'

'Because I don't,' she said, with one of her wayward frowns. 'I hate the whole subject. I don't want to hear any more about it. Did I say that very crossly? I can't help it; there has been so much fuss made about

it already. You will tell Millicent that I would rather she didn't mention it when we meet, won't you? I can't very well say so myself.'

'But you *are* going to write to her?' he suggested; 'she is longing to be friends with you again.'

'Of course I shall write—soon. But you know, Nugent, though she *is* your sister, she did very nearly make mischief between you and me.'

'Surely you will forget all that now?'

'I'm not sure that I can forget quite so easily. Millicent is so very good, she makes me uncomfortable sometimes. Still I am very glad she doesn't disapprove of me so much as she did. I shall try to keep her good opinion as long as possible.'

He had to be content with that for the present, though he wished she could have met poor Millicent's overtures with more responsiveness; but evidently the misconstruction still rankled.

Even this touch of petulant resentment, however, lost any touch of hardness under the charm of the expression which accompanied it, and seemed to indicate that she was less seriously displeased than she chose to represent. And there is no doubt that in her heart Margot was relieved by Millicent's unequivocal surrender, and had no intention of rejecting the proffered olive-branch.

July was drawing to an end, and the turf in the Parks was burnt and cracked, and the trees were turning a darker and deader green; in the streets the

musical old cry of 'Sweet laven—dar!' sounded like a lament for the expiring season. Day by day the block of carriages grew less complicated, the list of social arrangements in the daily papers shorter and less exclusive. Parliament was talking hopefully about rising, Goodwood was near, Society was arranging its plans for yacht, or moor, or foreign health resorts.

It was a welcome time for most who had been born to or achieved the right of revolving in some one of the rings of the social whirlpool; for Mrs. Chadwick the day when the whirlpool would subside and its prisoners be released seemed anything but a day of deliverance.

On that day she would have to go—not to Cowes, nor Yorkshire, nor the Continent—but to Gorsecombe, to a life she detested, and a husband who declined to be ignored. And her season had not been a success; her sister, Lady Yaverland, had not asked her to her best parties. Margot, just when people were beginning to rave about her, had thrown all her chances away by getting engaged to a penniless barrister, and Ida was no nearer being engaged than before. Whether Guy or Ida was more in fault for this she could not discover; she might have contrived to ascertain the young man's feelings from himself, if only she could get a private talk with him, but unluckily all her efforts to get him to the house of late had fallen through, whether by pure accident (for he was a youth of many engagements) or intention on his part, she could not determine. And Ida certainly did not manage well; she was shy and constrained when she met him, and every interview seemed to leave

them less likely to come to an understanding. Her mother could not even be certain that Ida had not some romantic scruple which might account for this provoking behaviour, and the fear of this helped to restrain her from precipitating matters by some *coup*.

She could not ask Guy down to Agra House, it was too near Hawleigh; and besides she knew that he was to accompany his aunt to Homburg at the end of the season. After his return home of course he would be staying away at various places for the shooting, and even if he came to Hawleigh to hunt, he would probably have got over his fancy by that time.

Mrs. Chadwick felt quite helpless, unless—there was just one chance—unless she could persuade her husband to see that she and Ida required a course of the Homburg waters. Once there, with Mrs. Antrobus as a benevolent neutral, if not an ally, she felt certain that the event she desired would be brought about.

Chadwick came up to town just then, as he had done occasionally throughout the summer, though he made his visits as short as possible. He was more sulky and irritable than usual, and his wife, as he fidgeted restlessly about the drawing-room, comparing it to its disadvantage with that at Agra House, began to feel doubtful as to the wisdom of broaching her scheme just then.

'How you can have lived all the summer in a hole like this *I* don't understand! Is it fashionable to keep your rooms as dark as if you were in mourning for some one? It makes me feel fit to cut my throat!'

'One must have the rooms cool,' said his wife, 'and that awning makes it possible to sit outside in the balcony.'

'It keeps out all the air here, at any rate; however, you won't stay here much longer now; your time's up next week, isn't it? and then I presume I shall have the pleasure of your society at home again?'

'I—I don't think quite just yet, Joshua,' she said nervously; 'I was thinking of taking Ida and Reggie over to Homburg for a few weeks.'

'And who was going to find the money?'

'You are always so liberal about that,' she faltered.

'Oh, I am, am I? But it's beginning to strike me that I don't get value for my money; they're beginning to look shy on me down at Gorsecombe. I've no doubt they're saying I'm a fellow whose own wife won't live with him, and, putting my own feelings aside, I don't see why I should spend money to have *that* said of me!'

'But I should come back very soon.'

'To tell you the plain truth,' he said brutally, 'I shouldn't care a damn if you didn't come back at all. I've got on very comfortably without you all this time, but it's the look of the thing *I* mind.'

'It is very unkind to say such things to me!' said his wife, from under a handkerchief; 'you know I asked you to come here with us, and you wouldn't! And Ida has been ordered to take the waters, and I'm sure I've tried to be a good wife to you, Joshua, and—and you wouldn't be alone at Gorsecombe either.

Margot and Lettice will be at home. How can people talk then?—and what do you care if they do?'

'I *don't* care; it isn't that. So I'm to have Margot and Lettice, eh? Well, that's better certainly, but they'll find some way of backing out of it. They're too fine to come and live all alone with me. Margot is, at any rate.'

'What am I, at any rate?' inquired Margot, who had entered the room in time to catch the last sentence.

'Your mother wants to go to Homburg with your sister and the boy,' he said, softened in spite of himself by the girl's bright beauty as she stood there, smiling interrogatively, 'and she was proposing to send you and the youngest girl down to keep me company at home. I was saying that wouldn't suit your ideas, after the excitement you've been going in for here.'

'Oh, but it would!' said Margot gaily. 'I—I like Gorsecombe. And it would do Lettie more good than the seaside; she is always asking when we are going back. We will both come—unless you don't want us?'

'Very well then, that's settled,' he said.

'And I may take Ida and Reggie to Homburg?' his wife asked.

'Take them to Timbuctoo if you like! I can do very well without Ida; she's no favourite of mine,' he said.

'Thank you, Joshua,' said Mrs. Chadwick meekly; 'and—I'm afraid I shall have to ask you for a cheque—I haven't nearly enough.'

'Then you ought to have!' he retorted. 'Why, you had enough to have lasted you a year when you came up!'

Mrs. Chadwick murmured something about 'everything being so dear in town;' she did not think it advisable to mention that she had left most of her bills unpaid—he would discover that quite soon enough.

'Well,' he said, 'tell me what's the smallest sum you can do with and I'll give you a cheque. I must have no more of this extravagance, remember, or I shall put my foot down in a way you won't like!'

Margot was too accustomed to scenes of this kind to feel any keen distress; but what did pain and alarm her was her step-father's contemptuous reference to Ida, for whom Chadwick never concealed his dislike.

However, it was settled that Mrs. Chadwick should have her way this time, and Margot was well content to go down to rest and quiet at Gorsecombe, where Nugent would probably find time to be. Even the prospect of her step-father's society did not damp her spirits—she was not afraid of him, and he behaved with more consideration to her than he showed for most other members of his family. Margot thought that she would be very far from unhappy.

Book VI

NEMESIS

CHAPTER I

LOVERS AND A RENDEZVOUS

MARGOT never did write in reply to Millicent's letter; she should see her so soon that it really was hardly worth while, she said; and it was not until they actually met at Gorsecombe that Millicent knew how far her overtures had succeeded. As soon as they were alone together, she caught Margot's hands and looked up into her face. 'Margot,' she said, 'can't you forgive me? Mayn't we be friends as we used to be?'

Miss Chevening bent down and kissed her on the forehead. 'You ridiculous Millicent!' she said. 'Of course we may.'

'But say you forgive me!' insisted Millicent.

'Forgive you?' repeated Margot; and in spite of her smile there was a touch of impatient displeasure in her voice. 'Oh, yes, yes!—if I have anything to forgive you for—there, let all that be understood; there's not the least necessity to go over it all again!'

So Millicent had to submit to be taken back into favour in this high-handed fashion, which even she found a little trying to her temper. But she was soon completely subjugated, as were all at the Vicarage, by Margot's acceptance of her position as one of

the household. The Vicar was charmed by her playful deference to him; Mrs. Orme wished she showed more interest in village work and topics generally, but admitted that she had a wonderful gift of brightening any place she entered. 'And it brings Nugent down here,' she would conclude; 'we shall see more of him than we used to. I really think this engagement is a good thing.'

Nugent had come down at the same time as Margot and Lettice, having no vacation work to detain him in town, and being determined to set aside any professional considerations rather than break the spell of these long happy days, few hours of which were spent away from his love.

Constantly as he saw her, they were seldom absolutely alone together. Gorsecombe society considered that their behaviour to one another in public was not lover-like enough, and even in private he was sensible of a certain fastidiousness in her which made him critical of his own utterances. But she let him see, too, with a pride that scorned any shallow coquetry, how thorough was her content to be with him, how completely her heart was his. She was the dearer for the reverence she knew how to inspire in him, and their intimacy was invested with a delicate charm that kept it from all danger of palling.

Margot was very happy in these days; she broke into little snatches of song from pure lightness of heart; she found it an effort sometimes to control herself to walk sedately, as she went about the house or grounds:

everything and everybody, with hardly an exception, had become interesting and delightful in the Gorsecombe she had once found so dull.

And yet, at home, there was a cloud which, much as she would have liked to disregard it, cast a shadow on this joyousness! Her old involuntary dislike and repulsion to her step-father had begun to revive of late, heightened this time by an undefined terror. He was away most of the day, driving or riding about the country, and returning to dinner in the evening in a condition varying between two extremes—sodden taciturnity and boisterous hilarity. He took wine freely at dinner, and she could see that he was in the habit of drinking heavily during the day. In every respect he had greatly deteriorated; he was less careful of what he said before her; there was an extravagance in his geniality, a wild light in his eye at times, that made her dread some violent outburst. She was glad when she could rise from the dinner table and join Lettice in the drawing-room, where he never followed.

The fact was that his sentiments towards his beautiful step-daughter were rather complicated. He admired her; he would have been fond of her had she shown any sign of affection for him; as it was, he was quite able to see that her dutifulness was a matter of expediency, and that in her heart she did not respect him, in spite of his blustering attempts at authority or his clumsy efforts to indulge her. The engagement with Nugent roused a dull resentment; he had not been consulted,

had been left out of the matter; he would have been ready enough (if for no other reason than that his wife was opposed to the match) to behave handsomely had his assistance been asked; but Margot had chosen to dispense with it, for which he bore her a secret grudge.

He was glad to have her there, nevertheless; it suited his humour—when he was in a fit state for such amusement—to try to provoke her proud spirit; he enjoyed seeing her eyes sparkle with anger, as she bit her lip to keep from retorting to his allusions to her family. At the same time, he was careful not to go too far; in his worst moments hitherto, he had never entirely lost an involuntary awe of this girl, which protected her against attacks that she might not have found it possible to ignore or overlook.

She was willing to bear much, rather than that he should expend his ill-humour upon its legitimate objects —her mother and Ida. Their absence abroad was the grievance which seemed to arouse his chief displeasure. He spoke of it, the expense, the uselessness, with a smouldering ferocity that might break out into a sudden blaze at the slightest pretext. Margot knew what hopes were associated with that stay at Homburg. For Ida's sake, she dreaded a disappointment; she had been charged by her mother to keep Chadwick in good humour at all hazards, but the strain on her nerves and temper was very severe at times.

As before, however, her natural buoyancy and perfect health carried her through. She could not mind

anything much—not even the almost nightly penance of bearing with the humours of a half-drunken man; not even the prospect of renewed dissensions when her mother relieved her from her duties—now that she had Nugent's love to sustain her.

She was silent, even to him, concerning such disagreeables as she had to bear; she scarcely remembered them in fact, after they had once passed; and much of the indifference with which she met her step-father's provocations was due to the fact that her mind was happily engaged in recalling what had passed during the day.

She rejoiced in the assurances every day brought her of the depth of Nugent's love, the supreme power she could exercise over him at will; she felt herself surrounded by an atmosphere of universal adoration which she had never appreciated before. At the Vicarage they made much of her; the Eddlestone girls were her devoted slaves and admirers. Her romantic choice of Orme, when it was rumoured that some of the oldest names and finest estates in the country had met with rejection at her hands, disarmed the jealousy of the most envious rivals; all spoke well of her, even in her absence; she won interest, sympathy, hearts, wherever she went.

And it was only natural that the consciousness of all this should produce a pleasant sense of self-approval that consoled her for the less agreeable side of her life. It made her view her behaviour to her step-father—her patient submission to his perversities—her endeavours to

put as good a face as possible upon her home life before the prying eyes of Gorsecombe gossips, in something of an heroic spirit.

Heroine or not, there came a time when her stock of forbearance was exhausted. She was sitting over the dessert with her step-father, who had been glowering and growling during the whole of the meal with even less than his usual regard to the presence of the servants. Margot was feeling tired and dispirited; Nugent had been called suddenly to chambers, and this time on a matter he must attend to; it had been hot and close all day, and she had gone to tea with the Eddlestone girls, and come back with a headache.

The evening post had just come in, and Chadwick was reading the letters that had been brought him, when he flung two of them across the fruit to Margot.

'Perhaps you'll be kind enough to explain what these damned things are about?' he said.

'They seem to be bills,' replied Margot calmly. 'One is the jobmaster's and the other the dressmaker's.'

'I am able to see that for myself. Why hasn't your mother paid them? What the —— are they sent in to *me* for?'

'I really can't tell you,' she said with a weary disdain. 'No doubt mother will be able to explain all about it.'

'I shall take good care that she *does* explain! Perhaps you don't know that she had an allowance which was enough to settle twenty such bills as these? Do you suppose I should have been fool enough to give her

more if I had known she had left any accounts unpaid? She distinctly gave me to understand when I gave her a cheque for this German bath nonsense that she owed nothing anywhere!'

'Isn't it possible that you misunderstood her?' said Margot; not, however, feeling much confidence in her suggestion.

'No, it's not. I tell you your mother got that last cheque out of me by false pretences—by what was nothing more nor less than downright lying swindling!'

Margot rose. 'You can't expect me to listen to this!' she said haughtily.

'Stay where you are, do you hear?' He looked so savage, with his eyes glaring at her out of the gloom, that she stood by her chair without attempting to leave. 'Do you think I married to let myself be ruined in this way? Have you any idea what your mother with her fine ideas and her smart friends has cost me already? How do *I* know what bills she's run up since you've been away? I'll not be made a fool of any longer. She shall come back at once, or I'll go out and fetch her myself!'

'If you do that,' said Margot, 'you will do more harm than you have any idea of. You will most probably ruin—yes, ruin—Ida's health, and her happiness too!'

'What the devil do I care for Ida? If the truth was known, she's had the greatest share in all this extravagance. I'm not blind. I know your mother is setting her heart on a grand match for her. She don't

deserve it—a whining, puling, affected thing like that. If it was *you* now! But you've chosen to take up with that barrister fellow. And just mind this: I'm not going to stand by and let my money be flung into the gutter to please your mother, or Ida, or anybody else. Why, d——n it all, I turned my only son away for not much more!'

'I wish you had turned us away instead,' she said passionately.

'I may come to that yet, with some of you,' he retorted. 'I'm near the end of my tether.'

'If you are near the end, I am nearer,' she said. 'How dare you talk as if you were ill-used and cheated by us? Why did you marry my mother? You did not even pretend it was for *love*—you wanted some one who would help you to make a position here. Would anybody come here—would the people about here even speak to you now, if it was not for *us*? You know they would not! And now—now you have got your position, you are doing all you can to disgrace it, and us. You insult our friends when they come, you refuse to pay the slightest attention to ordinary civilities, and you wonder that mother is willing to go away anywhere, to be away from you a short time! You ought to be grateful that she does not refuse to live in your house at all. I wish she would and take us all—anything would be better than this! You are rich—how rich I don't know, but you *are* rich—and it is mean and cowardly and tyrannous to complain of expenses which can be nothing to you. You expected certain things from us—how

have we disappointed you? What have I done, what has any of us done, that you should say such things of us?'

He sat there with open mouth, listening to this tirade; she looked so superb in her rage that his own fury, which was mostly worked up by the action of drink on an inflamed brain, exhaled in sullen admiration.

'I wasn't speaking of you,' he said; 'you're perfect, I know,' he added, with what was only a perfunctory sneer. 'You're not very flattering to me, I must say. I never said I wanted to get rid of *you*, or grudged you anything, did I!'

'I will be treated as the others are,' she said.

'Well,' he went on, 'I got excited. I didn't mean to blame you about those infernal bills—damn the bills! —but, for all you say, I think I've got some right on my side, and I don't mean to stand this sort of thing for ever. However, I dare say I said things I'd better have left unsaid, though, by God, it wouldn't take much more to make me as good as my words, too. The bills can wait till your mother comes back . . . and—and shake hands, like a sensible girl, and say no more about it.'

He held out a great hand, and Margot, feeling that she should infallibly break down if she remained there any longer, just touched it with her own and hurried away.

Chadwick helped himself from the spirit-decanter, after which he sat musing.

'Damn it!' he said half aloud, 'I like her pluck; she turned on me like a little queen . . . Pretty things for a man to hear from his step-daughter. If the other girl had said half that I should have killed her, I believe!'

If Margot had come away victorious, she was in no mood to exult over her success. She was a little ashamed of it; she hated these sordid quarrels. By reminding him of what he owed to his marriage, she felt that she had descended to his own level. And yet she had averted a real danger; he was capable just then of carrying out his threat if her sudden blaze of indignation had not sobered him in a way that could not have been expected. She thought of her mother, with her feeble stratagems and unnecessary deceptions, and trembled for the future. As to her own, she had less uneasiness; soon she would be away from all this—safe with Nugent. But Ida? If Ida missed making this marriage by any chance, what a life would be hers, under her step-father's sneering banter, varied by such threats as he had just used, without her own power of self-protection! No; that should never be! Ida should live with her; she should not be left to wither under a blighting sense of dislike.

But Margot felt too shaken and unstrung by that evening's encounter to write to Nugent, as she had intended; she could not have written without betraying her distress and anxiety in some way, so she preferred to be silent. The next morning she had letters which brought back her gaiety—one from Nugent, the first he

had ever written since their engagement, full of his misery at his absence from her and announcing his return that evening—the other from Ida, written in the highest spirits from Homburg. She was 'happier than she had ever had any idea of; Guy had spoken at last; they had both been very silly in not understanding one another sooner; it seemed that he had actually taken it into his head that she did not care for him. Not care for Guy! As if——' and here followed raptures in Ida's usual hyperbolical strain.

But Margot felt all her fears of the previous evening disperse. Ida was safe now—safe and happy—and Nugent was coming back! What did anything else matter?

'Why, Margot, you kissed me on *both* cheeks!' exclaimed Lettice, after releasing herself. 'Is—is anything the matter?'

'Nothing, you uncomplimentary child!' said Margot; 'only you look so nice in that pretty pink frock, I couldn't help it.'

'I think my blue is nicer, but it isn't the week for that,' observed Lettice. 'Margot, papa's gone out for all day, he won't be home to dinner. Aren't you glad? Now *I* can have dinner with you!'

'You shall, pet; and do you know what we will do this morning? You shall get Susan to help you with your habit, and we will have a long ride together, just you and I.'

'And take Yarrow?' said Lettice, with dancing eyes.

'Not Yarrow—he's not strong enough for a long run, poor dear!'

It has been mentioned already that Margot was now able to gratify her love for riding; Lettice had begun to learn in town, and the Vicarage pony, a quiet animal, was, as to-day, generally at her disposal. Lettice acknowledged the wisdom of leaving Yarrow at home, the pony was brought round from the Vicarage stables, the boy saddled Margot's mare, and she and Lettice set off in high spirits.

They had no one in attendance, as the coachman had gone with Chadwick and the dog-cart. Lettice chattered all the way through the village and along the road to the downs; she had already regained much of her health in Gorsecombe air.

'We must be turning home now,' said Margot at the end of a delicious canter over the springy turf, along the back of a ridge commanding a great expanse of rich country lying bathed in a shimmering haze of August sunshine; 'we mustn't be late for lunch; the Eddlestones are coming to tennis afterwards. Have you enjoyed it, Lettice?'

'N—not *quite* so much as the pony!' said Lettice conscientiously. 'Don't you think your horse would like to look at the view a little now, Margot?'

'Oh, Lettie!' said Margot, laughing, 'we won't canter any more, if that is what you mean, but I thought you were going to be such a horsewoman.'

'I'm not a horsewoman yet. If I'm anything, I'm a ponygirl, I suppose. And I like galloping

fast very much, if it wouldn't take my breath away so.'

So, seeing that Lettice was not yet completely at home in the saddle, Margot went quietly home by the road which led past the village green.

'What a lot of people!' said Lettice. 'See, Margot, they're putting up swings and a steam-circus and tents; there's going to be a fair there this evening.'

There certainly were more people about the village than usual, and it was necessary to be careful in threading their way through. When they were entering the gates Lettice said, 'Margot, am I sitting *very* crooked?'

'You sit very nicely, Lettice,' said Margot. 'Why?'

'Because there was a man who stared at me so—in such a queer way, so I stared at him. And he was like—like somebody, and I can't think who—somebody I know; it was only just the eyes, you know. I wish I could remember!'

'It was rude of him to stare,' said Margot, 'but it's not very likely he was criticising your seat, dear. I shouldn't trouble my head about him.'

But as Lettice was running upstairs to change, she stopped and said softly to herself, '*I* know now who had eyes like that—*Allen*! But the rest of the face wasn't like him at all.' And she did not mention it to Margot, who, she perhaps divined, would not be pleased at the introduction of his name.

The Eddlestones came to tennis, and left late, after

making arrangements for a picnic expedition the next day.

'What will you wear to-night, miss?' asked Susan, as Margot came up to her room to dress.

'Oh, anything,' said Margot; 'there are only Miss Lettice and I, you know; it's absurd to dress.'

'Yes, miss. Oh, there was a message I was to give you—to ask you most particular to be down at the summer-house, the stone one, by half-past nine to-night.'

'Then—is Mr. Orme back, Susan? Have you seen him?'

Susan smiled demurely. 'I wasn't to mention no names,' she said; 'he seemed to think you'd know who it was.'

'I didn't know Nugent was so romantic,' thought Margot; but all she said was, 'On second thoughts, Susan, you can put out my dress as usual.'

'Very well, miss,' said the handmaid.

Lettice usually went to bed about nine, though she pleaded for a little license this evening. At length Margot was able to induce her to say good-night and go upstairs, but it was a little past the half-hour when, throwing a light shawl over her head, she went with a light step across the lawn and along the path to the place of rendezvous.

'I shall have to scold Nugent for sending me a verbal message,' she was thinking; but she knew that her rebuke would not be very severe.

Some one was waiting there in the shadow by the

Indian fir. But surely that was not Nugent's figure? It came forward in a hesitating, slouching way into the moonlight, and, starting with an irrepressible gesture of dismay, she recognised the face—changed but unmistakable—of Allen Chadwick!

CHAPTER II

A RETROSPECT

> Sick in the world's regard, wretched and low,
> A poor unminded outlaw sneaking home.
> *Hen. IV. Pt.* 1, *A.* 4.

After an absence and silence of nearly two years, Allen Chadwick was once more returned to the home where his presence was so little desired. What had been his history during all those months? Had he made good his promise of returning with wealth that should justify his disobedience? Why had he come home at this particular time, and what was his object in seeking to see Margot alone and in secret?

These are points as to which it may be presumed that some at least who have followed this history so far will require to be informed, and, this being the most appropriate and convenient place for such information, it shall be given with as little tediousness as possible.

We left him, it may be remembered, going out to Bombay, as a saloon passenger, on the P. & O. steamer 'Chusan.' Amongst the passengers was a man named Denham, the only person on board with whom Allen formed any real intimacy. Denham was a communicative man, by no means exacting as to his

acquaintances; he found Allen a good listener, and took a sort of fancy to him during the voyage, which was not many days old before Allen had been told most that there was to tell of the other's affairs.

Denham, it appeared, had been a coffee-planter in the Wynaad district in Southern India, and, in a part of the estate not yet under cultivation, accident had discovered what there seemed every reason to believe was a valuable reef of gold-bearing quartz. He kept the discovery to himself for a time, got rid of part of his property, and, having bought up all that he could get of the land under which the reef was estimated to lie, formed a company to open up and work the mine. He had been to England for the purpose of getting this company properly floated, and superintending the construction of the necessary mining-plant. In a short time the mine would be at work, and in the opinion of all the experts he had consulted would yield a fabulous return. Southern India, it was confidently believed, was to prove a second California.

All this, and much more, he told Allen, as indeed most people with whom he fell into conversation. To Allen the very name of gold-mine was enough: he was going out against his will to a business he detested in advance, in which he would be under the supervision of a man who had been expressly cautioned against trusting him, in which no efforts of his could advance him materially. He confided to Denham his distaste to what lay before him, and his longing to escape from it if possible. Denham commended his spirit, and in a

moment of expansion proposed one day that Allen should accompany him to the scene of action—they would find something for him to do by-and-by in the accountant's office, as he had some acquaintance with figures. Allen caught eagerly at the idea, but he was anxious to have a more personal connection with the venture. He had money, more money than he would need now, he explained. Was it possible to get shares still, and would Denham help him to do so? Denham, after a little demurring, undertook to manage this, and he did so out of sheer good nature. He was a thorough believer in the mine himself, he was pleased with Allen's enthusiasm, the shares were certain to go up, the deposit amount was small, he would take care that the young fellow, who evidently had no harm in him and only wanted looking after, incurred no loss by them; and so the greater part of the money which Chadwick, in a fit of compunction, had given his son at parting was laid out in this manner.

Arrived at Bombay, it was not difficult to get his baggage and be safe in the Madras train with Denham, before Chadwick's manager, who had no means of identifying him, had discovered that he had been given the slip.

Five days later, Allen was at the Mattaputty mine from which so much was expected. His notions had been of the vaguest kind, hardly going beyond a vision of men in red shirts washing immense nuggets out of cradles. And the reality was a disappointment at first. There was plenty of activity, but not of the kind he had

imagined; coolies were cutting down trees, making roads, and building sheds, huts, and bungalows. Along the face of the bare and rugged hills, tunnels and shafts were being driven to ascertain the dip of the reef, but he had not understood till then what long and laborious processes were necessary before any appreciable amount of gold could be extracted.

Denham, however, was always sanguine; nothing serious could be attempted until the elaborate 'batteries' and 'stamps' arrived and were set up. In the meantime the assayers in London, to whom samples had been sent, reported an average yield little short of fabulous.

Allen soon caught the prevailing tone of enthusiasm. But there was nothing for him to do; his duties were simply nominal at present, though he had a small salary which enabled him to live. Sometimes, in very weariness of being idle, and impatience with the slow rate of progress, he got leave to accompany the Cornish miners into the tunnels and do such work as was entrusted to him—and dull and exhausting work he found it.

And then there were difficulties and delays; some of the machinery was not sent out or miscarried on the way; the buildings erected to receive it were found unsuitable and had to be rebuilt; after months of unsuccessful labour it was discovered that the miners had sunk their shaft on the wrong side of the dip and were only getting further from the reef. All this did not prevent very roseate reports being issued, nor did it shake Denham's confidence in ultimate success, but it did make the expenses very heavy, and dishearten

many who had been hopeful enough till now. At last the machinery was in working order, the masses of stored quartz were crushed and reduced, and gold, though barely enough to pay the expenses of obtaining it, was actually produced.

But the enforced idleness, the feverish, constantly defeated expectation of some sudden good fortune had, as might have been foreseen, a demoralising effect on Allen. He was unpopular with the staff, who looked on him as a useless intruder; he had to make friends as he could among the miners, some of whom were a rough and reckless set; he even associated with some of the Madrassee Eurasians who were employed in the mine and who had most of the vices of their mixed race.

Denham took little notice of him, though he warned him at times against some of his companions, but he was too preoccupied to take much interest in his proceedings.

Left to himself as he was, with no resources to occupy his mind and no regular work to steady him, the wonder was rather that Allen did not go to ruin altogether, than that he should be guilty of an occasional lapse. But the same hope which made any settled way of life impossible to him—the dream of some stroke of brilliant fortune in which he would share—preserved him from any irretrievable downfall. The knowledge of all that he had borne and was bearing for Margot kept him from losing his self-respect entirely. Every day that passed increased the claim he had on her gratitude, he would not do anything that might make him ashamed

to return when he had the power. But there were times when despondency got the better of him, and he took the only way of escaping it that was open to him. And in due course the dry season came on, and he was attacked by fever, which, though not dangerous, lingered obstinately about him, wearing, weakening, and depressing, till the rains brought relief and cure.

He learnt on his recovery that the mine was further from prosperity than ever. During the dry season an unforeseen calamity had befallen them, the water-power by which all the machinery was driven had failed, the reservoir had proved quite inadequate, and for weeks the works had been almost at a standstill. Allen happened to meet Denham on the day he heard this, and, in the irritable, nervous state his illness had left, blurted out some expressions which the other chose to resent. 'I meant to do you a good turn by bringing you here,' he said; 'I thought I could make something of you in time—but I see I was mistaken. And now you as good as tell me I've swindled you! I'll not be told that twice—you shall make over your shares to me, and I'll give you back what you've paid on them, and the sooner you're out of this place the better for me and for you!'

Allen had not expected this, and pleaded against dismissal, but Denham's patience was exhausted. Allen was of no use in the office, he was glad of an excuse for getting rid of him, so the transfer was made and Allen's connection with the Mattaputty mine came to an end. And the day after this was finally arranged, the tide of

fortune turned—another and a richer dip was struck, the mine was in a fair way to pay at last, and Allen was left with the tormenting reflection that he had behaved like an ungrateful fool, and that if he had been content to keep his dissatisfaction to himself and wait a little longer, the shares he had parted with might have realised a handsome sum after all.

However, he had to make his way back by Ootacamund to Madras, where Denham had given him some introductions, though he advised him not to stay in the country but to go home at once. Go home! Allen thought bitterly, what reception would he have there now? Should he make his way back to Bombay and the Behar plantation? He was ashamed to do so after so long a time, and all this enforced idleness had unfitted him more than ever for hard work. He got no further than Ootacamund, where he stayed at the hotel while his money lasted—which was not long; he was reckless now, it seemed useless to be economical. With a wild idea of repairing his folly he took to gambling, and there were card-players there very ready to relieve him of his last rupee. Then he was obliged to find something to do, and succeeded in finding employment in one of the shops in the town. It was hard but not ill-paid work, and he was able to put by a proportion of his wages to pay his passage to England. For he was longing to get back; not that he had any definite purpose in returning—he certainly did not dream of approaching his father at present—but he was impatient to leave this strange, splendid, unfriendly India, where he felt himself more

incongruous than ever. In London he would feel at home, even alone; there would no longer be the great ocean between himself and Margot. Who knew whether he might not find courage to see her some time, when he had earned the right?

Towards the middle of July—the July in which Margot became engaged—he landed in England, poorer in purse and prospects than he had left; and, in London, he could think of no better plan than applying to his old employers. Fortunately for him, they happened to have a vacancy just then, a situation far inferior to that he had held, but one which he was glad to take nevertheless. He had hired a room in Clerkenwell, and there he had lived for nearly a month, going about his daily work in the big establishment with a stolid indifference to the questions and sneers of some who had been employed there with him before, and who were inclined to be curious or merry concerning his short-lived career as a man of fortune.

He lived a solitary life; he had no friends, the aunt he had lived with as a boy had left her old home long ago, and he did not know her address. His life was temperate, he seemed to have lost all taste for amusement of any kind; when night came he was generally too tired to care for anything but sleep. Yet he was not unhappy; he was back in England, in the same country as Margot, he was independent, he felt as if he was doing something to redeem his mistakes.

He did not know she was in London; he thought of her as down at Gorsecombe, he was constantly dreaming

of her. One night in particular he thought he had come home and had gone round by the garden and they had met. And she had come forward and taken his hands and thanked him, her beautiful eyes wet with tears, for the sacrifice he had made for her, pitying him for all he had gone through. And then he thought she had explained why she had been silent, and how there was no need for silence now, and in some sweet indefinable way she had made him understand that she loved him and had always loved him, that they would never part now. And, with the wonder and rapture of this still thrilling him, he had awoke to find it a dream!

But this dream left a lasting impression upon him which time deepened rather than effaced. It was so vivid, so lifelike, that it seemed to him like a sign or prophecy sent for his guidance. Why might he not fulfil it?

If he could only see her, and she could know the penalty he had paid for shielding her, surely she would speak at last! Whatever reasons she had had for not avowing her part in the matter before must have ceased long ago to be of any serious importance. Still, he could not go to his father until he had seen her first. Unless he was able to come back with a full exculpation from the crime for which he had been banished, he might as well stay where he was. And how was he to clear himself without undoing his sacrifice—the one act in all his life which he could look back upon with pride? He would see Margot first; he would tell her

all he had gone through on her account, and how tired he had grown of his exile. There would be no need to ask her to speak for him—she would understand, she would be the first to insist on repairing her wrong; his condition was different now from what it had been when he was sent out.

He felt rather than reasoned all this; two things were clear in his mind—that if he went back it should not be in disgrace, that his exoneration should come through Margot. We all—the least imaginative of us—dramatise little scenes with ourselves in the *rôle noble*. Allen pictured that interview beforehand: she would be shocked, remorseful, tender—he would be generous and chivalrous; perhaps even the most extravagant part of his dream did not seem altogether improbable to him. And at last he resolved that he would delay no longer; he would arise and go, like the prodigal in the parable—though, in his case, it was not his father from whom he hoped most. He was like the prodigal in most respects: he had journeyed (though heaven knows unwillingly enough) into a far country, he had wasted his substance with riotous living, he had fed the swine and gone hungry himself; and yet he was not going back in a spirit of utter self-abasement—not all the fault was on his side, not all the forgiveness on theirs—surely he might hope, he too, for the robe and the ring, the fatted calf and the music. Some pardonable confidence he felt, a justifiable conviction that he had a right to expect admission, that Margot would now be willing to vindicate him.

It happened that he had a couple of days at his disposal, in consideration of having been obliged, as the junior *employé*, to attend at the office as usual on the August Bank Holiday ten days before. And so he had gone down to Gorsecombe one bright August morning. With what mixed emotions he neared the little station! How familiar and unchanged everything looked! There was the road on which he had taken those terrible rides on Hussar, there was the copse where he had waited for Barchard that winter afternoon. His heart sank as he got out of the train; he had arrived—but what was he to do next? How should he obtain that meeting with Margot?

There were no carriages or dog-carts waiting at the station, he saw no one he knew, except the station-master and porter, who did not recognise him. This was not extraordinary, for the beard he had grown and exposure to a tropical sun had greatly altered him; he was poorly and roughly dressed too, having purposely put on his worst clothes.

He walked slowly down the dusty road from the station to the village, thinking over his next proceedings. On an ordinary day his appearance would have provoked curiosity and comment as he passed down the main street, where strangers were always objects of interest. To-day, however, there were other attractions; a local benefit club was holding its annual holiday, which was spent in going to church in procession behind a brass band to hear a sermon in the morning, and dining and disporting themselves generally for

the remainder of the day. A small fair with all the usual attractions was established on the green, and the place was too full of visitors from the neighbouring villages, of tramps and gipsies, for Allen's appearance to excite any sensation.

He passed the church, with the black and gold clock protruding like a great eye from the base of its squat slate steeple. Outside in the churchyard were the bandsmen and the banner-bearers, resting under the lime-trees with a comfortable conviction that hearing a weekday sermon was not included in their duties. Inside, the members of the club were listening to a discourse to which, being proudly conscious of having subscribed to pay for it, they were critically attentive, with a disposition to resent any dismissal before at least an hour had expired. The wide street and the quaint little shops were all just the same; in the watchmaker's window the same row of fat silver watches dangled, freckling their faces in the sun. There was the same timepiece, constructed of varnished fir-cones—one of them had fallen out, that was all. At the bonnet-maker's, there was the same box of frilling in front of the muslin curtains, frilling amongst which a misguided bee was wasting his time, under the evident impression that it was a honeycomb. And the grocer's shop-front showed the same placards; not a tea-chest, nor a jam-pot, nor a jar of sweets seemed to have been removed since he stood there that December morning, while his fate was being decided by Margot—only now the panes were alive with wasps swarming up and down in restless activity, undeterred by the ugly

warning which a half-foot layer of their dead and dying brethren below might have afforded.

Presently the club came out of church, decorated with blue rosettes and gaudy green sashes, their red faces wearing a grin of sheepish importance, and then, preceded by the band, slouched up the street to promenade the green until dinner-time. Allen recognised most of them, though they did not know him; he was looking on mechanically at the procession, when presently he saw something which made his heart leap within him.

Two persons were riding through the crowd, one a little girl with long floating auburn hair under her velvet cap, the other a slender lissome figure, who was occupied in soothing her spirited little mare as it pranced delicately at the blare of the band. They were Margot and Lettice, the only two beings he cared for in the world. They passed close to him; he could have touched the skirt of Margot's habit—but he could not find courage to speak to her. She looked far lovelier than the girl who lived in his memory—sweeter, happier. And how superbly she sat her horse! They passed on; the little girl looked at him curiously, but evidently without recognition, and now they were clattering round the corner out of sight.

Allen stood there rooted to the ground in the hot sun, looking after them. She *was* here then—he might see and speak to her before the day closed. He felt strangely excited and yet hopeful. 'Perhaps,' he was thinking, 'by this time next week *I* shall be

riding with them!' For his Mattaputty experiences had at least left him a gainer in one respect—he could ride decently enough now; it was the only means of getting about the country out there, and at one time he had ridden constantly with Denham. The idea of exhibiting this acquirement of his to Margot by-and-by gave him a boyish pleasure; in contemplating it he forgot all that had to be gone through before he could take his place again in home life.

By this time the club had filed into the 'White Lion,' where the dinner was to be held, which reminded Allen that he was hungry. He would dine too; it would fill up the time while he was arranging some plan for getting speech with Margot. At the 'White Lion' he might be recognised, and he shrank from recognition just then; but there was the other inn, the 'Seven Stars,' just opposite, homelier but respectable—he had never been there before. So to the 'Seven Stars' he went.

CHAPTER III

BUT A LITTLE LONGER

My Lady verily awaiteth me;
So that until with Her I be
For my dear Lady's sake
I am right fain to make
Out from my pain a pillow and to take
Grief for a golden garment unto me;
Knowing that I, at last, shall stand
In that green garden-land,
And in the holding of my dear Love's hand
Forget the grieving and the misery.

Austin Dobson.

The big kitchen of the 'Seven Stars' looked very cool and comfortable as Allen entered.

There was company there—two labourers sat at one of the rough tables, dining on bread and cheese and cold bacon; a postman at another near the settle, who, however, rose hastily as he saw a stranger and removed himself and his food to an adjoining apartment; a very old peasant in a smock frock, who seemed to have had as much liquor as was good for him, and was seated on a stool quavering unintelligibly to the fire; and, lastly, Mrs. Parkinjear herself on a chair in her usual corner. The sun gave a brilliant transparency to the red curtain

and the green plants at the window, leaving the interior of the room in shade.

'Come in and sit ye down, sir, whoever ye be,' said Mrs. Parkinjear; 'I've lost my eyesight, sir, as you can see, and I can't attend to you as once I could, but my dear granddarter will be back in a minute. It's a sad deprivation to me. Minnie'll be here directly, she's only stepped down to the cellar to draw a mug of cider for postman here. You're fond o' cider, ain't ye, postman?'

Naturally there was no reply, and the old lady called 'Postman!' then, more persuasively, 'Posty! Ah, he'll have run away when you come in. He's a wonderful shy sort o' man for a postman, so he is!'

Allen gave his order when Minnie reappeared and sat in the background, eating his humble fare, and listening to the labourers, neither of whom he knew by sight. One was a good-looking stupid fellow with a sleepy smile, white teeth, and luxuriant whiskers; the other, fair, florid, burly and opinionated, seemed to be laying down the law on the subject of mowing. Allen listened, partly because there was nothing else to do, partly because he hoped sooner or later to hear some allusion to his family.

'Bumble's a very good mower, he is,' said the burly man, 'a' cuts in and a' cuts out, but a' takes a good deal less ground nor what he used. Reason why —man's older.'

'I carl old Eddards better nor him,' said the sleepy man, with the air of one who speaks under correction.

'Old Eddards is all very well in grass—but what good 'ud old Eddards be with a *lawn*, eh? You cudn't put 'un in a clover-field neither; now, *could* ye?'

'No, you cudn't put 'un to do that, sart'nly,' conceded the other.

'He could cut 'un, mind you, he could *cut* 'un—but he wouldn't git *along*, old Eddards wouldn't. Now there's *you*, Jim, you can mow pretty well, I will say *that* of ye, and there ain't on'y one fault I has to find with ye—you mows too *'igh*, you cuts your ground clane enough, but your bottom neb's too fur down the end o' your scythe; this 'and's too fur down the stick, d'ye see? Now you bring your neb up just *that* fur apart; then you can drive your ground out straight, d'ye see?'

'Yes,' said the other man, too sleepy to resent this advice, 'yes, I can see there's sense in that.'

'Ah, I *know* there is. Now, there's 'Opper, he's a very good mower—he *is* a good mower if ye like—lays his ground out straight, makes a curve just no bigger nor that, lays around him like ——! Chadwick's gardener took him on for a job last month up at Agra House, so a' was tellin' me.'

But here, just as the conversation began to be interesting, Mrs. Parkinjear struck in. 'I hope Minnie's been attending to you, sir?' she said to Allen; 'you must mention it if you ain't got all you require. 'Tis a fine afternoon, isn't it? I can feel the sun where I'm settin'. My poor dear 'usband was allays one for letting in the sun to the very end, he was. He was in

the brick-making business, but he wasn't no scollard, dear man,' she rambled on. 'I might have had him now, only he had to go over to Closeborough one day, and he was in a hurry to get back to me, and got caught in that awful storm and couldn't get back nor forwards, and from that moment never had a well moment with the brownchitis, poor thing!'

'Talking o' storms, missus,' said the burly man, 'we'll have one afore we're many hours older, call me a liar if we don't; been brewing up for it since noon.'

'Well, things are too far forward to be damaged now, we'll hope,' said Mrs. Parkinjear, not best pleased at the diversion. 'And, as I was telling you, sir, before I was took up, there was my poor son, he was out in New Zealand, gum-digging, and he come home suddenly and walked from the station, meaning to step in unexpected like and have a bit of fun with his poor father, he being so brown and altered, and on the way he meets some one he knows and says, careless like, "Know if father's at home?" sez he; and they says, "Your mother's downstairs and about again, but your father's dead and buried this three months." And, poor dear boy, he wasn't well for a month after, for he was main and fond of his dear father, he was.'

Allen felt a sudden misgiving—what if *his* father too had died in his absence? But no, these men had mentioned him just now; Margot had not looked as if any sorrow had happened recently at home; still, he must try to get some information, though he was con-

scious of having little skill in extracting it; he would lead the talk to Margot as well as he could.

'You're gay here to-day,' he began awkwardly; 'quite a fair going on, I see.'

'It's their club-day here, you see, and that wakes things up a little. Why ain't *you* with 'em, Garge?'

'B'long to the 'And-in-'And,' explained Garge gruffly. 'Our club-day was July. *We* 'ad the ridgmental band over from Closeborough to it, and there was a deal more swing-boats and merry-go-rounds than what there is to-day.'

'Ah,' sighed Mrs. Parkinjear, 'there'll be fine doings when night comes on. I don't hold with folks making beasts of theirselves, keeping other folks from their night's rest; it's time it was put down, to my thinking.'

'Well, I dunno, it ain't a bad thing for *your* business, y' know; look at it that way.'

'I don't encourage none of that in *my* bar. This is a respectable house, and I'll keep it so; if they want to get drunk, they must go over the way.'

'Why don't ye send *'im* over the way?' said Garge with a grin, pointing to the old labourer on the stool.

'He's had a drop too much before he come to me, and he don't ought to come here at all, as he knows very well when he's like this,' said the landlady, raising her voice for the old gentleman's edification—not that she produced any impression, as he instantly began to crow and cackle, like an agricultural Mr. Dolls, for a 'lil drop more gin.'

'It's against my conscience to serve him at all,' said

Mrs. Parkinjear austerely; 'but he'll only go where he'll be worse treated if I don't keep him quiet. Minnie, take my keys out of my pocket; you can draw Mr. Ricketts a little drop, but it's the last he's to have, mind that! Don't take any notice of him, sir,' she added to Allen, 'it's the band and the 'oliday and that, that's upset him.'

'The band nearly frightened a—a young lady's horse just now,' said Allen, taking courage at this opportunity; 'there was a little girl on a pony with her. Do you know who they are?'

'Garge, you can tell the gentleman maybe,' said Mrs. Parkinjear; 'I can't see no 'orses nowadays, no, nor yet no ponies, ah, dear!'

'A young lady on a 'orse?' said Garge stolidly, 'there's a many young ladies as rides their 'orses about 'ere.'

'Likely it 'ud be Miss 'Otham from 'Awleigh Court,' suggested his friend; 'I've seen her over here times. Or did ye say there was a little gal on a pony; pooty little gal? long 'air? It'll be Muster Chadwick's darters, sure 'nough. Yes, that's 'oo it'll be.'

'They ain't his darters, on'y his darters-in-law, in a manner o' speaking,' corrected the opinionated man, 'I 'eard Draper Spufford tellin' somebody so t'other day.'

'And Draper Spufford spoke no more than the truth *then*!' put in the landlady. 'I mind their coming here—two years last Easter, was it? somewhere about that, I know. Mr. Chadwick hadn't only just been married to those gells' mother. Yes, Jim, you're

right. It was Miss Chevening the gentleman saw. I might have known it was.'

'Then hadn't this Mr. Chadwick any family of his own?' asked Allen in a thick voice.

'He hadn't only but one son as *I* ever heard on, and, from all accounts, he wasn't sorry to see his back. Not as there was ever much harm in the young man, from all I could learn; he was more silly-like than downright bad; he used to be about with young Bob Barchard, who was a reg'lar bad lot, and went and 'listed for a soldier since, and I don't envy the Queen her bargain!'

'But the son—do you know what became of him?'

'It isn't rightly known where he is now; he went out to America, or some outlandish place like that, and he done something out there that his father wouldn't put up with nohow, for their coachman Mr. Topham, and a very nice civil-spoken man he is too, was saying in this very room how it was as much now as their place was worth, any of 'em, to mention Mr. Allen (that was the young man's name, sir) to his father. "He's no son o' mine," says Mr. Chadwick; "if he comes back here, I'll have the door shut in his face. Mind that!" he says. And the curious part of it is, sir, if you'll believe me, that the old gentleman—this one's father—turned *his* son out o' doors too. It shows how these things runs in families, don't it?'

'I suppose,' said Allen, 'you don't happen to know—you didn't hear whether the—the young lady took his part at all?'

'That I'm sure I can't tell you, sir, but from what I did hear, it wouldn't be likely any of them would interfere; they're not *his* blood, you see, and, besides, they none of them took to him when he was living in the same house, and I dessay, if the truth was known, they weren't sorry when he took himself off and wasn't likely to trouble *them* no more. And in course all Mr. Chadwick's money 'ull go to *them* now!'

'Ah!' said Allen, 'it's that way, is it? But she—the eldest one, I mean—didn't look the sort of girl to care about the money.'

'I'm a poor blind old lady now, sir, and I can't tell. I've heard she's a sweet pretty face of her own, though proud and high in her ways, but she's been here with Miss Millicent, the Vicar's daughter, once or twice, and spoke as pleasant and kind as you please, with a voice that did my 'eart good to listen to. But you can't tell what she had to put up with from such a step-brother as he was. Like enough she'd reason to be ashamed of him, and not want him back.'

'Yes,' said Allen heavily, 'like enough. And is his father living here now?'

'He was a day or two ago, I know. He lives there most of his time; he ain't at all liked in these parts—don't get on with the gentry, so they say, and I 'eard he'd been seen driving about that drunk he couldn't 'ardly keep hold on the reins, and that in broad daylight!'

'*I* see him the other day,' said Jim; 'it was knock-off time with me, and I was coming home down Piper's Lane when he druv by. I thart I'd ha' bin run over

the way he was going, first one side, then t'other, and a-larrupin' with his whip. "Damn your eyes, stand out o' my way!" sez he. And I did, pretty sharp too. He wur drunk *then* fast enough.'

Allen had heard as much as he could bear by this time; he paid his reckoning and went out of the inn into the dazzling street. So his conjectures were only too true—his father had cast him off; the servants had orders to shut the doors against him! He had meant to go round by the back entrance to Agra House, and try to get some one to carry a message to Margot for him—but now he was afraid.

Still he wandered up towards the house, half hoping that he might see Margot herself; he came to the well-remembered gates, with their pretentious stone pillars and glittering gas-lamps; no one was at the lodge, but he did not go in, he skirted the palings of the plantation for some distance till he came to a point whence he could command a distant glimpse of the house and lawn. Perhaps Margot might be sitting or walking there alone. As he drew nearer he heard the faint ring of girls' laughter and voices from the tennis-court, where the game was being played in defiance of the sultry heat. There were four of them playing—two spectators, a girl and a child—was it Lettice?—sat in wicker chairs in the shade—and the tallest of the players, the one in the white tunic over a dark blue skirt, that must be Margot herself! He stood there, straining his eyes with a yearning attempt to see her more distinctly still, till presently the players changed sides, and she was screened from

him by a clump of young firs, though now and then he caught the clear gay tones of her voice.

He turned away with a heavy heart; she seemed so happy, so completely to have forgotten—and besides, it was hopeless to think of trying to approach her just then. Just then! How did he know that he might not have to go back with his purpose unexecuted after all?

But it appeared that fortune did not intend to be so cruel as this, for, as he went slowly with bent head down the lane, still pursued by those happy voices, he saw a trim, smartly dressed form advancing towards him—it was Susan! Here was hope at least, for surely she would befriend him.

'Susan,' he cried eagerly—'Susan!'

'Upon my word, young man!' said the girl, 'who gave you leave to make so free with my name? I'm not Susan to the likes of you, I can promise you!'

'Don't you know me, Susan? Won't you stop and speak to me?'

'Mercy on us!' she cried, 'if it isn't Mr. —! So *you're* come back, are you?'

'Yes,' he said humbly, 'I've come back.'

'Wherever you've been, you don't seem to have made your fortune there, judging by appearances,' she remarked; 'you are a pretty scarecrow, I must say. And what do you mean to do now you *are* back?'

'I—I don't know yet. Is—is the governor dead-set against me, Susan?'

'You'd better not let him ketch sight of you, I can

tell you that—partickler when he's like he mostly is just now! But, luckily for you, he's away for a day or two at present—off on the spree I shouldn't wonder, and small blame to him, with Missus away constant!'

'Is she away now, then?'

'Away at a place called 'Umbug—and the proper place for her, *I* say! She, and Miss Ida, and the young gentleman. There's only Miss Margot and Miss Lettice at home just now. If I was you, I'd walk straight in and say I'd come back and meant to stop—and then let your father turn you out if he could!'

'I can't do that, Susan—not till I've seen *her*.'

'Which her? Miss Lettice? You'll see enough of her after—she's everywhere, she is, and that spoilt, with no one being allowed to say a word to her, I've no patience with it. But I'm not her nurse, oh dear no!—I'm only her maid, and have to put up with all her tantrums!'

'It's not Lettice I want; it's—it's Margot. I must see her, Susan, before—before I can come back.'

'Can't you come back without her leave and licence? But I remember now—didn't you go away at first to please her ladyship? Well, you won't find you please her so much by coming back, it's my belief.'

'What do you know about it? She will help me—she *must*!'

'Must?' said Susan; 'you talk pretty big. One would think you had a reason for it.'

Allen was a little alarmed at having let the word slip out. 'I—I didn't mean it that way,' he said,

'never mind that. Look here, Susan, I've not much time to spare—that is, unless—unless it all goes right. And for that I must see her, and privately, and I want you to help me. You will, Susan, won't you? I'll make it worth your while some day, if I can't now.'

'Much use it is helping *you*! I've tried that before, and much thanks I got for it. But I'll try once more. You be at—let me see—at the round summer-house down by the lane there by half-past nine to-night, and I'll engage she shall come out to you.'

'What shall you tell her?'

'Never you mind; but she'll come, and you take my advice, don't you stand no nonsense from her. Show her you're master, and if she's not acted true to you, don't have no mercy on her, for she don't deserve it.'

'What do you mean?' he asked; 'what do you know?'

'Me? I don't mean nothing. If she hasn't been making a fool of you, she hasn't, and that's all about it. Anyway, you can settle that between you this evening; and now I can't dawdle here talking any longer, I'm going down to the village for a bit. I've little enough time I can call my own. As for you—you'd better keep out of the way till you're wanted. Take a walk, I should, away from everybody, where you won't be noticed. And by the time you're back, she'll be there waiting for you—don't you worry yourself about that.'

Susan tripped off down the lane towards the village, humming. 'I've put a spoke in Miss Margot's wheel,

this time!' she was reflecting. 'I'd give a month's wages to see her face when she comes out and finds it's *him*! She'd sooner see him dead than back, I'll go bail. Unless I'm very much mistaken, he's got some hold over her. I only hope he's the pluck to use it. And if he does, and gets taken back, why, then he's soft enough for me to catch him yet if I come round him gradual. Ought I to have told him as she was carrying on with that Orme? No, he might have give it all up and gone away then; she may tell him that herself!'

Susan's idea of the situation was far enough from the truth, but she guessed that Allen had the power of making her young mistress exceedingly uncomfortable, an end which—independently of her own private interest in Allen's return to his family—she was willing to promote to the best of her ability.

Allen had some hours to kill before his interview with Margot, and acted upon Susan's advice in keeping out of the way for the present. He struck a smaller lane which led him to a road below, and then toiled up a dusty road to a hill where he knew of a footpath which would take him to Bramley Common.

His heart was still heavy, though there was now a limit fixed for this suspense, but, as he walked on in the sultry afternoon heat, he was lulled into a vague content. He had never been very sensitive to Nature, but now, whether the undulating valleys and stupendous mountain ranges of Southern India or the arid monotony of London had taught him to be more appreciative, he was soothed and comforted by the peace-

ful English surroundings, the plain below with its patches of bright yellow, green and chocolate, the deep blue hills beyond, seen through quivering haze, the clumps of gorse, their gold now tarnished, the chirp of the grasshoppers, and the warm scent of the bracken.

And he went on up the steep track and over the common, till he came to the little church outside which he had stood in the darkness that memorable Sunday night. He unpinned the wooden gate and went to the porch; the door stood open, and he entered and sat down in the first pew. Outside, there was a view of the churchyard with its grey orange-spotted tombs, and small conical yews, and beyond, up the slope of green and gold meadow-land red cattle were grazing in the sunshine. Inside it was still and cool and solemn; the sills of the deep Norman windows and the edges of the pews were stained with brilliant patches of colour from the painted glass; the clock in the tower above ticked loudly in the silence; some one had put some lilies, gladioli, and sweet peas in the vases on the altar.

He sat there, at first thinking only how good was this absolute rest and shade after the weariness and heat. Gradually the place began to exercise an influence over him; over the porch he had read in faded red letters, 'This is none other than the House of God.' Allen was neither religious nor irreligious; it was rather a superstitious instinct that came over him just then. If he were to pray now, here—might he not have a chance of being heard? He knelt down on the narrow

footstool in the pew, and for a moment his ideas left him. He remembered no prayer, he could think of no words. On the ledge in front was a tattered old prayer-book—would not that help him? It fell open mechanically at the place for Morning Prayer, and his eye fell on the General Confession. 'Erred and strayed like lost sheep . . . Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults. Restore thou them that are penitent.' He took the phrase literally, without attaching any spiritual meaning to it; 'restore' for him meant restoration to home, love, character, all that made his life; but that did not affect the fervour and humility with which he repeated the words aloud, half alarmed by the sound of his own voice in the stillness. Then, before he rose, he added, with an odd feeling that he must make the most he could of this opportunity, 'And, O God, make her kind to me; make her ready to tell everything. Amen.'

Then he rose and came out of the church, feeling strangely relieved, sure indeed that now all would be well with him. The afternoon was drawing into evening, the sun was sinking in a coppery veil, the white dust on the road was tinged with pink, but the air was closer and heavier than ever, even on the common in the open.

He was worn out, and threw himself down on the rusty bracken, where he soon fell dreamlessly asleep. When he awoke, the moon had risen over the firs, and a few stars shone overhead; in the west, a sullen mass of clouds was rising like a lowered and battlemented wall,

a 'looming bastion fringed with fire.' He sat there a while, confused and languid, and then he remembered where he was and what he had to do. Was luck against him even now? Was he too late? He was seized with a horrible fear that this was so, when the clock in the church at the edge of the common struck. He counted the strokes with bated breath: seven, eight, nine—thank God! no more, unless he had mistaken. A clock, distant but still audible, struck down in the valley—no, it *was* nine. There was time to get to the garden and meet Margot yet at the appointed hour, if he made haste.

He hurried back feverishly, clambering down the dim grey path, swinging through the lanes under the interlacing willows and sycamores, where it was difficult to find air enough to breathe, running madly along the road, till he was close once more to the lane where he had met Susan, and need hurry no more.

And then he trembled with expectation; his dream—his dream was already close on its fulfilment: he would see her face to face once more, hold her hand, hear her voice. That night he might sleep under the old roof—to-morrow he need not go back to the hard cheerless toil of his London life! Yet he lingered before he could make up his mind to pass the little rustic gate, the old fear had returned upon him. As he stood there breathing hard after his running, the hot air was stirred and chilled by a sudden breeze, and the chill seemed to fall on his heart. If she refused to speak—if she really did hate him? Ah, no—she could not

hate him—not after all she knew, he need not fear that.

Still he stood there in the moonlight, till Gorsecombe church clock struck the two quarters, and then he went in and along the well-remembered paths to the stone summer-house, a somewhat barbaric record of his grandfather's Arcadian ideals.

He waited, listening eagerly for Margot's step on the gravel; all he heard was the harsh discordance of the organs in the fair down below, and then that faint rustling sweep over the grass, the light eager footfall. She was coming—she was coming at last! He felt comforted, reassured by this eagerness of hers, and, filled with a hope too wondrous, too splendid for belief, he rose and went to meet her.

CHAPTER IV

UNDECEIVED

Doch du drängst mich selbst von hinnen,
Bittre Worte spricht dein Mund;
Wahnsinn wühlt in meinen Sinnen
Und mein Herz ist krank und wund.—*Heine.*

ALLEN must have been slow indeed of perception if the startled surprise, the shade of embarrassment in Margot's manner had escaped him as she stood there, her eyes looking large, dark, and mysterious under the light shawl, her arms and neck gleaming fair in the moonlight. He thought the change in her manner was caused by his own altered appearance, and grew abashed and conscious again at the impression he felt he produced.

'It's me, Margot,' he said—'Allen. Don't be frightened.'

The beautiful mouth curled a little. 'I am not frightened,' she said; 'but—but why did you play me such a trick as this?'

'I thought Susan would have told you I was here,' he said; 'didn't you know who wanted to see you?'

'Susan never mentioned your name. I thought—never mind what I thought now. So you have come

back, Allen? I always knew you would come back—but not like this.'

She did not hold out her hand nor smile—she stood there, looking at him with scarcely an effort to mask her displeasure. Was this the welcome he had dreamed of?

'I—I couldn't help coming back,' he said awkwardly; 'I thought you wouldn't mind—I know I'm not much to look at.'

'I was not thinking of your appearance,' she said, with a touch of shame. 'It is your sending for me like this that I don't quite understand. Why did you?'

'Because—oh, Margot, can't you guess? can't you see? I can't stand the life I've been living any longer. Why should I, when there's a home I can go to? I want to come back—I've been in disgrace long enough!'

'What is the use of saying that to me, Allen? Your father is the only person who can allow you to come back.'

'And if I went to him, what would he do?—send me about my business. That's why I came to you first.'

She was silent for a moment, thinking. Then she said, 'It would certainly be useless for you to try to see him; he is not even at home just now, and—and he is terribly angry with you. I doubt whether he will listen to anything you might say.'

'He will listen to you!' he urged eagerly. 'Margot,

you wouldn't speak up for me before. I know—I know, you *couldn't*; but it isn't the same now, you must see it isn't! Will you speak to him now—will you, Margot?'

'Listen, Allen,' she said with a cold gentleness; 'will you promise me to go back to wherever you are living now, and wait patiently a little longer—only a little longer? If you will, I will do what I can for you; but if you stay here or attempt to act for yourself, you will ruin all your chances, remember that.'

He could have fallen down and worshipped her in the enthusiasm of his gratitude. 'I *knew* you'd help me!' he cried; 'I knew you wouldn't leave a poor devil out in the cold when a word from you——. Oh, I will wait as long as you please—I know you will make it as short as you can; I will do anything you tell me, if only I come back at the end. God bless you, Margot!'

He seized her hand and was covering it with kisses. 'Don't!' she said, shrinking fastidiously from this uncouth fervour, 'Don't touch me, Allen! there is nothing to thank me for—as yet. I have promised to help you, and—and I will. Now write down for me where you are living, so that I can send for you when it is safe to do so, and then you must go away.'

There was a small stone table in the summer-house behind them, and she stood by him there as he scribbled the address in pencil on a scrap of paper. 'That's where I live,' he said; 'I wish you could see it, Margot—you

wouldn't leave me there longer than you could help, I know, if you did.'

She took the paper gravely and put it in her dress. 'Allen,' she said, 'you—you must not deceive yourself. Your father is very strange now—very violent—he may refuse to forgive you.'

'Forgive me!' he said, 'what for?—when he knows all about it!'

'You know best whether he has much to forgive; but I should have thought that after running away as you did . . . and—and was there not some money he had trusted you with?'

'I ran away because I was not going to be under a man who'd been told I was a—a thief. And the money was mine—the governor gave it to me—I had a right to spend it how I chose. I thought I was going to make my fortune with it. I very nearly did, too—but that's a long story. Anyway, he'll forgive me all that, Margot—he'll say I couldn't have acted any other way, when you tell him how it was I came to take that locket.'

'You know very well I cannot tell him that!' she cried indignantly.

Allen rose and looked her straight in the face.

'Perhaps you won't mind saying what it is you *will* tell him?' he said sullenly.

'I shall tell him that you have been unfortunate, that you have suffered, and borne hardship all this time, that you are sorry and will never disgrace him again, that it is time to forgive—what more can I say?'

'And you think I'll be taken back as a favour?' he asked—'come home to be spoken at, and watched, and treated as if I was a downright bad lot; have everybody told all about how I'd been allowed home, though, if I'd had my deserts, I ought to have been left to die in the gutter? No, by God! I've had enough of that the last time. It's not me that has to be forgiven most!'

She shrank back from his hot breath as he placed his face close to hers; there was a look of his father in it just then, distorted as it was with fierce passion, which made her afraid of Allen for the first time.

He saw this. 'I've frightened you now, at all events,' he said. 'So you nearly made a fool of me again—nearly, but not quite! I thought you meant to tell all and take the consequences, whatever they are—they can't be worse for you than me. And it seems you mean to hold your tongue still!'

He felt a savage pleasure in the sight of her beautiful startled face, with the dawning terror in the eyes that had been so proud a minute before.

'What do you want me to tell?' she asked faintly.

'Everything,' he said. 'How you wrote to me from Bournemouth, where you were, asking me to get that locket and sell it and send you the money; how I was caught taking it, and said nothing sooner than get you in a row; and how you came home and kept quiet and made me keep quiet too.'

'I made you keep quiet?' she cried; 'how could I prevent you from telling any story you chose?'

'Oh, you were clever enough!' he said. 'You kept out of my way as much as you could, and you knew better than to ask me to hold my tongue in so many words; but you managed to make me understand for all that. And I was true to you—you know I was! Not many chaps would have done what I did, when the very thought of going out to that beastly plantation sickened me, and I'd only to say a word. But I didn't—I wasn't going to have you despising me; I meant to show you that I could act like a gentleman—better than some gentlemen—if I liked. I thought you'd make it up to me some day, and just now it seemed as if you would. And you meant me to go on bearing it! It's too much! I've been your catspaw all this time; I might have gone on longer if you'd given me so much as a kind word, anything to show you were commonly thankful; but you stand there looking at me as cool as if I was no account to such as you, and I'm tired of it—I tell you I'm tired of it. The governor and I used to be good friends enough once, when we were alone together; he'd be friendly now, directly he knew I wasn't the blackguard I was made out to be. And why shouldn't he know? He *shall* know!'

She was trembling a little, but she made an effort to be contemptuous. 'It will not be very wise of you to go to him with such a story as that,' she said; 'he would not believe it without some other evidence than yours. And if I was questioned I should deny it—do you hear? I can tell him that it is all false, that you have imagined it, invented it while you have been

away. I never wrote such a letter; I never obliged you to keep silence; it is all a lie—a lie from beginning to end!'

She compelled him to involuntary admiration, so superbly lovely did she look in her desperate refusal to yield. 'I believe you would,' he said slowly, 'and you would make him believe you, too, if you spoke like that! Margot, you're a devil—a beautiful cruel devil. It's lucky for me that I haven't only my word to go upon.'

'What do you mean?' she said hoarsely.

'Why, I kept your letter. I've got it with me at this very moment.'

'You kept it—kept the letter? You think I shall believe that? Show it to me—I dare you to show it to me.'

'It's very likely I should trust it in your hands now,' he said.

'You pretend to think it would not be safe with me!' she cried in bitter scorn; 'what a pitiful excuse to make! But I know why you make it—I am not afraid of that letter, it is only another lie! I have heard quite enough; I shall have no more to do with you, Allen. If you are mad enough to tell this—this impossible tale, do so and take the consequences!'

'Take care what you're doing,' he said; 'don't drive me too far—you know very well I'm no liar, whatever other people may be. Look here, Margot, I daresay I'm a fool to trust you, but, if you'll swear to me to let me have it back, I'll show you that letter,

and then you'll see it's no good holding out any longer.'

'My word is enough,' she said proudly, and held out her hand in imperious demand; 'if you really have it, give it to me.'

It was strange, but though he knew how vital the possession of that letter was to both of them, he never thought of resisting her. He did not even exact a more express promise, it was difficult for him even then to believe her capable of so mean a treachery. He took out a worn leather case from an inner pocket, extracted a paper, soiled and yellowed by frequent perusals, and gave it into her hands.

The moon was bright enough for it to be possible to read even that faded ink with a little trouble. Margot stepped out upon the path and read, Allen watching her face meanwhile.

When she came to the end she shivered—a terrible temptation was assailing her. 'You were asked to destroy this,' she said, in a low tremulous voice. 'Why didn't you?'

'It was worth too much to me for that!' he answered. How often, when his fortunes were at their worst, his spirits at their lowest, had the sight of that letter been a talisman to him, reminding him, as it did, that even his life had held one bright episode!'

'This is my letter,' she said—'you admit that yourself; what is to prevent me from destroying it?'

'Nothing,' he said, 'if your word doesn't; yes, I was a fool to trust you after all!'

She thrust it back into his hand as if the paper scorched her. 'Take it,' she said, 'or—or I might forget, I don't know . . . Take it, and use it against me, against us all. That is why you have kept it all this time—why you were silent when you might have spoken! You wished to make your claim as heavy as possible. You knew that every day you were away, and every hardship you endured only gave you a greater hold upon me. And now you have come back to turn the tables! It is just—just enough, I suppose; but you might have spared me the form of consulting me!'

He turned away his face for a moment. 'I think you'll drive me mad, Margot,' he cried in his pain. 'God knows I never kept it for—for that! I kept it because it was the only thing I had that came from you. I've been bad enough, but I should have been worse if it wasn't for having it. And you think it was *that*! I came here meaning to put it to you whether I hadn't been punished enough for your fault. I thought you'd see it was fair now that I should be cleared, and the blame put on the right shoulders; I thought, when you saw what I was, you'd feel a bit sorry and willing to make it up to me like. But I no more meant to threaten or—or do anything against your wishes than —than that moon there. It was you that forced me to say what I did. When I heard you talk as if you'd forgotten, and didn't mean to remember all that was, and promising as a great favour to ask the governor to forgive me for what I never did, why, it wasn't in

nature that I shouldn't speak plain! Is it so much, I ask you, to speak the truth now and have justice done to me? I'm so miserable, Margot, miserable and lonely, and sick of it all—no one to care a damn whether I'm ill or well, alive or dead! And coming back like this, and seeing the old place, and you again, oh! it isn't wonderful I can't feel as if I could stay away for ever—though I won't be forgiven out of favour; no, I'd sooner go back and drudge till I died than that! But you can clear me, if you only will.'

'You must clear yourself,' she said in the same low voice; 'I cannot go to your father with such a confession as that. At least, I *will* not—there! You have your character in your own hands, and it is for you to speak, not me!'

'You treat me like the dirt,' he said, 'you always did. You'd sooner be cut in pieces than be humble now, even when you're worsted. Well, if I'm treated as dirt, I'll behave like it. I shan't get less credit for it. I *will* clear my character—there! I will come back and take my place among you all, whether you like it or not.'

'Yes, you will come back,' she said; 'you will take your place again, but not amongst us—we shall at least be spared that!'

'Not amongst you?' he repeated; 'how do you mean?'

'If you really don't understand what the effect of this will be, I will tell you. You don't know what your father has been of late. He hates us—yes, I believe he

hates us all in his heart. He feels that we are a restraint upon him; he would be only too glad of an excuse for ridding himself of us all—all! And if—if this story is proved true, he will make no distinctions; he will declare it was a plot, a plot to ruin you; he will say that we were all guilty alike; we shall be disgraced, turned out of the house!'

'No, you will not; I will take care of that, Margot. He shall not hurt you.'

'You—*you*! What influence did you ever have with him when you were at home? And now, you will have difficulty enough in making your own peace. But *ours*—no, you will not be able to save us. And even if he listened to you, if he condescended to keep us, do you think *I* would stay, whatever the—the others did? Why, rather than live here when *that* was known and talked about everywhere, as it would be—your father will not spare us, I know—rather than do that, I would go anywhere, bear anything in the world. If you are expecting that all will go on exactly as it did before, you make a mistake, and it is as well that you should understand that at once!'

There was no violence in her manner—she spoke with a repressed, concentrated scorn shrivelling as an acid; only the heaving of her breast and the trembling she could not control betrayed the white heat of passion that consumed her.

His heart swelled at her injustice, her ungrateful unreasonableness. 'Ah,' he said bitterly, 'you can't find words hard enough for me! Do you suppose I

don't know, without that, how you despise me, and hate the very sight of me? And yet, tell me this—what have I ever done to you to deserve to be treated like this? Was it my doing that I was sent away? Isn't it natural that I should want to be taken back after all this time?'

She had sunk down on the bench, and was covering her face with a low moan; she made a writhing movement of pain at the last speech of his, and then raised her head as she replied hopelessly:

'Natural? Oh, yes, it is perfectly natural. It is I that am unnatural, I suppose. I—I can't help it. You must come back, it must all be told; it is justice, I admit all that—anything you choose—but I cannot be expected to—to *welcome* you, can I? Oh, what a mean, miserable business it all is, and no escape, no excuse. If I had known—if I had known!'

She sat there, swaying under her burden of crushing shame, and he sat at some distance from her, awed by the sight of this dumb misery, trying to persuade himself that he could not be rightly held to blame for it, and yet with an ever-growing self-reproach. Some might have found a sweetness in the spectacle of such humiliation, Allen only had an uneasy sense of being somehow in the wrong.

Suddenly Margot started. 'There is some one in the garden—on the lawn,' she exclaimed in a whisper. 'Look!'

From where they sat they could see the grey tennis-court indented by deep black shadows, and there, past

the lowered tennis-net, a small figure was flitting noiselessly across.

'It's Lettice!' cried Margot; 'she must not see you here—come into the shadow, quick! I will go to her, and send her in. Stay where you are till I come back!'

'No,' he said, 'let me see her—let me speak to her, Margot. She—she used to like me once!'

'Why should you see her? Do you want to make her as miserable as you have made me? Let her be for to-night, poor child—she will know soon enough!'

He dropped back cowed at this, and Margot went to Lettice. 'I've found them,' cried Lettice. 'I knew I'd left them there.'

'You know you ought not to be running about the garden so late as this,' said Margot; 'Susan should not have allowed it!'

'Susan never came to me to-night, and I was just putting myself to bed when it suddenly struck me that I never gave Pussie Eddlestone back her bangles. It was at tennis this afternoon, and she took them off while she was playing and asked me to take care of them for her. So I hung them on a branch out of the way, and somehow I forgot all about them till just now—wasn't it funny of me? But there they were, just where I left them, and they haven't got rusted or anything, Margot—look.'

And Lettice held out two silver bangles adorned with foolish little dangling nuts. Margot felt a bewildering sensation of strangeness. Pussie Eddlestone

—the tennis party, only that afternoon—how far away it all seemed!

She tried to speak as usual, but her voice shook. 'You shouldn't be so careless, dear, and—and it is late; now you have found them go in, go in at once!'

'What is the matter, Margot?' Lettice asked quickly; 'your hands are quite cold, and oh, how they are trembling! Was it you I heard talking to somebody just now? I *did* hear talking, I'm sure. Who is here?'

'No one—no one,' said Margot hastily; 'go back to your room, Lettie.'

'Now I'm *sure* somebody is here—for you've been crying, Margot!' Then Lettice caught Margot's arm impulsively. '*I* know what it is,' she cried; 'Allen has come back—he is in that place over there. I shall go to him.'

'No, Lettice, I forbid you—do you hear?'

But Lettice was already skimming over the moonlit lawn in the direction of the summer-house, and would listen to no commands to return. Margot was constrained to follow; she was powerless now—after all, it mattered so very little!

As she came near, she heard Lettice's eager greeting: 'Oh, Allen, Allen, you have come back! I knew you wouldn't stay away always; I *am* so glad!'

When Margot reached them, Lettice was scrutinising Allen as he sat there with her hands laid on his shoulders. 'I wasn't sure it was you, quite at first,'

she was saying, 'you look so tired, and shabby, and sorry, Allen dear!'

'I'm all that, Lettie,' he answered.

'I suppose that's why Margot was crying so?'

'Was it?' he said grimly. 'I think she was crying on her own account, Lettie, not mine.'

'Oh, no—not that—*were* you, Margot? Why *should* she, you know? And now you've come back, Allen, and I'm sure papa will forgive you when he sees how poor you are—though he was dreadfully angry at first, oh, dreadfully! Then you will live here with us, just as you used to, and you won't do anything naughty again, and have to go away, will you?'

'When Allen comes back,' said Margot, 'it is we who may have to go away, Lettice.'

'Why? We are not naughty, Margot! Oh, I don't believe that—do you, Allen? You won't want to have us sent away—why, you would be all alone, you know!'

'I can't stand this,' said Allen; 'Lettie, do you see this paper?'

'Allen!' cried Margot quickly, 'you will not tell her—you can't do *that*!'

'Wait till I have done,' he said roughly. 'Here, take this paper, Lettice, in your two hands so—don't look at it. Now tear it across and across, as small as you can—that's the style—there!'

Margot gave a quick gasping sigh, as she stood spell-bound, while Lettice tore the letter into fragments before her eyes. She could not speak, could not even think, for conflict of her emotions just then.

'Couldn't you have done that yourself?' said Lettice, as she let the pieces drift on the stone floor; 'it was quite *easy*, Allen!'

'Oh, yes,' he said, with a curious laugh, 'easy enough; but—well, I thought I'd rather see you do it, Lettie.'

'I wish you had told me what it all meant—I don't like doing things without knowing in the least what I am doing.'

'Can you keep a secret, Lettice? Yes, I see you can. Very well, promise not to tell anyone you've seen me to-night or—or anything, till I give you leave.'

'I promise faithfully. But you are not going away, not again?'

'Yes I am—I must, Lettie.'

'But only for a little while—you'll come back, Allen, won't you?'

'Oh, that's all right—don't you be alarmed, it's only for a little while. Now you've promised, Lettie, remember!'

'I always keep my word—I keep it much more than Reggie does—don't I, Margot? And so long as you're coming back, it won't be at all hard. Oh, Allen, wouldn't you like to see Yarrow before you go? He's been so ill, dear doggie, and we thought he would die once, but he got better directly we came back, and I know he'll be glad to see you! May I go to the stables and get him, Margot?'

Margot could not speak, so Lettice took permission for granted and was off in the direction of the stables.

'Margot,' said Allen, when they were alone together, 'I—I'd better be off. I can't wait. I've had about as much as I can bear as it is!'

Margot's answer was a burst of passionate sobbing. 'Allen,' she murmured, when the fit had abated somewhat, 'what can I say? what can I do? It is all so wrong—I feel so ashamed—so ashamed . . . and yet I cannot—no, I cannot do anything!'

Poor Allen could do nothing graciously—it was not in his nature. 'You're not asked to do anything,' he said, brutally enough—only he did not feel brutally.

'You must go,' she said wildly, 'it is the only thing; but, oh, Allen, I *am* grateful! I am indeed . . . and —and some day, soon perhaps, if I can—if I only can —I will make it up to you!'

'Margot!' he cried, 'do you mean that? Is there a chance of—what do I care now? Nothing—that was all I wanted in the world!'

She knew that he had mistaken her meaning, yet she could not bring herself to undeceive him then—it would have been too cruel. For the moment she may even have felt capable of that supreme sacrifice under the overwhelming sense of obligation. She did not answer, she even let him seize her hand, though she shrank as much as ever from the mere prospect of being embraced by him. Perhaps he saw that; at all events, the dreaded embrace was spared her—he let her hand fall abruptly, and the next moment she realised that he had gone. Then, with tottering, uncertain steps, she went to intercept Lettice and the collie, trying to invent

some story that should satisfy Lettice's mind on Allen's unceremonious departure.

But Allen was once more back in his Fool's Paradise. At last, at last he had touched her heart! She was no more proud and ungrateful, his final sacrifice had conquered her—had she not almost confessed that she might love him in time? To be loved by Margot—what a destiny for a low common fellow like him! And yet it was true, or it might be true some day. Now he could go back to his drudgery and his solitude with a light heart—he had only to be patient for a while. It was better, far better than living at Agra House, enjoying his father's favour, while Margot was far away, thinking of him, when she thought at all, with scorn and abhorrence.

So his heart was light as he turned down the familiar road to the village. There the festivities were still in full swing: broad bars of lamplight streamed from all the doors; there were small sweetstuff and toy booths along the street, their canvas sides illuminated by flaring candles; the tap-rooms of the inns were full, and, on the green, the steam-circus was revolving with a glitter of mirrors, vermilion and gilding, the riders, old and young, sweeping by in grinning delight on their ridiculous steeds amidst a deafening babel of organ-playing, rifle-cracking and shouting. Hard by were the gipsy vans, and in the cabin-like interior of one he saw a small child preparing to go to bed. The mellow lamplight made a glory round her long hair, reminding him of Lettice. He went up to the open casement,

with its neat brass rail and muslin curtains, and threw a small piece of silver (he had not many to throw away) at the feet of the astonished child.

Then he left the village and its unwonted noise and bustle behind him, and went on to the station. It was late, but he thought there might be a train to town about that time, at all events he would go and see. He was on the down-platform trying to find a porter to answer his inquiries; a train had just come in, however, and he had to wait. As he stood there, a young man got out of a compartment and came towards him; it was Nugent Orme, whose quick eye had recognised Allen, despite all alterations. He came up and laid a hand on his shoulder: 'Chadwick!' he cried; 'so you have come home? I had no idea you were in the train!'

If Allen could have escaped recognition he would have done so; he felt too excited and exalted for any companionship just then—he wanted to be alone and think of Margot, and how she had looked and spoken just at the last. But Orme had seen him, and he could not deny his identity.

'I wasn't in it,' he said; 'I—I was going back to London, sir.' The 'sir' slipped out unconsciously; he felt his own inferiority under the gaze of Orme's penetrating but very far from unkindly grey eyes.

'You can't go back to-night, you know,' said Orme; 'the last train has gone. Come back with me to the Vicarage—we can give you a bed for the night.'

Allen hesitated, but the kindness in the other's tone

touched him. 'If—if it won't be putting you out of your way, sir,' he said.

'Of course it won't; and look here, Chadwick, you can drop the "sir." I thought that was settled long ago. Come along, then—my people will be delighted to see you.' For the life of him he could not say that with quite the full accent of conviction. Allen looked a shabby and disreputable guest to bring into the Vicarage without warning. Orme felt that his mother might protest with some reason.

However, he could not feel any of the disgust and indignation which had coloured his thoughts of Allen of late. Whatever he had done and whatever he was, he was in a state now which called only for pity and forbearance. In delicacy, Orme would have spared him even questioning just then, but he felt it important to know how Allen was situated before he could help him effectually.

So as they were going along the dark lane from the station together, he began:

'When did you come down here, Chadwick?' Allen told him. 'And have you seen your father yet?'

'No—he wasn't at home.'

'But surely you weren't going away without making an attempt to see him?'

'There'd be no use in my seeing him.'

'Then what did you come down for?'

'That's my business,' said Allen.

'Of course it is!' retorted Nugent rather sharply

'by all means keep your own counsel if you prefer to, though you might understand that I don't ask out of idle curiosity.'

'I came down to see—somebody,' Allen admitted, 'and—and I've seen her, and got all I wanted.'

Orme stopped; his face looked set and stern under the lamp on the footpath. 'If that means that you've been at your old tricks, Chadwick, you had better say so at once, before we go another step together. Have you been trying to annoy Mar—Miss Chevening—yes or no?'

'I saw her, it was in the garden,' said Allen doggedly; 'I didn't mean to annoy her.'

'Perhaps not; but whether you meant it or not, what good could it do? You could only distress her! If you wish to come home, be a man, Chadwick; go to your father and speak to him—don't skulk about the grounds frightening girls. You can stay at the Vicarage till he returns.'

'Orme, I take my oath I never meant to skulk or—or frighten her, and you don't understand. I—I can't come back. . . . I've done what will prevent me from that!'

'Did she tell you so?'

'No – she wouldn't have prevented me, only—only I didn't want to, that was all.'

Orme breathed more freely; for an instant he had been afraid that Margot had been unrelenting to this poor prodigal—had turned him from his father's gates.

'Look here, Chadwick,' he said more kindly, 'no one can help you if you won't help yourself. You must pluck up courage and see your father. I can't believe that he will be hard on you—you have paid dearly enough, I'm afraid, for giving way to a moment's temptation.'

They were walking on now and had reached the first few outlying houses of the village.

'What do you mean when you say that?' cried Allen; 'what do you know?'

'My dear fellow, whatever I know, you must not think I am anything but sorry for you just now.'

'You said "temptation,"' insisted Allen—'temptation to what?'

'To dishonesty—if you will have an answer.'

'Do you mean using the money the governor gave me—*gave* me, mind?'

'I do not mean that, as you know very well. I meant the theft for which you were sent away. What is the use of denying it to me, when I know everything?'

Allen's face worked violently. 'You know—you know!' he repeated in a strangled voice. 'Orme, for God's sake tell me who told you that? Was it—was it—Margot?'

'If it was,' said Orme, 'we have no secrets from one another, Chadwick—we are engaged. It is natural that she should tell me.'

'Damn her!' said Allen fiercely. 'So she told you that, did she? She! God, if I'd known that a little

time ago! Orme, I've a good mind to— No, you've been kind to me—and what's the use? what does it all matter? You'll be seeing her to-morrow, I daresay. Well, you tell her from me that I'm a low common chap on my road to the devil by the shortest way I can find, but I'd sooner be as I am than what *she* is—that's all. I won't trouble you with my company any longer—you're all too moral and strait-laced for the likes of me, I daresay!'

Orme was angry as well. 'If you're bent on going to the devil, go!' he said; 'I'll not try to prevent you any longer,' and he turned on his heel. By-and-by he thought the other's outburst was due to some crack-brained jealousy, and stopped undecidedly. Had he not been too hard on him? Was not an imprecation, even against Margot, pardonable under the circumstances? But Allen was out of sight: black clouds had gathered overhead effacing the moon, and heavy drops were falling in wet stars on the dust. Perhaps this made it easier to abandon Allen's reclamation as hopeless. Nugent turned in at the Vicarage, not, after all, unthankful to be alone.

The rain came down in sheets soon after he was indoors, and once more he had scruples. However, no doubt Allen had found shelter somewhere, he thought, and he was right. At that moment Allen was in a low pothouse in a back lane of the village, engaged in getting drunk with as much expedition as possible.

Some hours after the rain was still falling, but he

was no longer sheltered from it; he was lying in drunken torpor under a hedge by the roadside.

So ended his expedition, and with it all the dreams and hopes that, shadowy as they were, had kept him from falling earlier into brutalising despair.

CHAPTER V

ON THE VERGE

> Unsichtbar zuckt auch Schmerz um deinen Mund,
> Verborgne Thräne trübt des Auges Schein,
> Der stolze Busen hegt geheime Wund.—*Heine.*

ORME awoke next morning to that sense of vague dissatisfaction which most of us have known at some time. He soon traced it to its proper source—his conscience was not at ease about his treatment of Allen Chadwick. He wished too late that he had refused to let him go; he had a guilty recollection of being over-ready to take him at his word.

It was this, perhaps, that kept him from mentioning that meeting when he came down to breakfast, and impelled him to ease his conscience afterwards by endeavouring to find out whether Allen was still in the village or not.

If he went to the station he might intercept him yet, and he went to begin his inquiries there. The rain had ceased, it was a grey muggy morning, the muddy roads were strewn with prematurely fallen leaves, and were beginning to steam in the slowly returning heat. Though it was mid-August still, autumn had given its

first warning of decay, the cooled and moistened air was charged with its enervating melancholy.

Orme kept a sharp look-out as he walked on, but he saw no one resembling Allen on his road to the station. There he found a porter, whom he questioned. Yes, the porter had seen a young fellow corresponding to the description; he had come in early that morning and sat by the fire in the porters' room, it being uncommon cold for the time of year. If the porter was asked his opinion, he would say that the young chap had spent the night out of doors, for he was wet to the skin and muddy—'well, there, he was a mask of it!' 'But, bless you,' he continued, 'those tramps, they think nothing of sleeping out in all weathers, sooner than go to a workhouse, sir. This one seemed all stupid like, been on the drink heavy and laid down in the first ditch as came 'andy. I kep' thinking, too, as I'd seen his face before, and I asked him if he didn't belong to these parts, but he said he didn't belong nowhere. And when the 7.40 up come in, he got in and went off by it. I hope you ain't missed nothing up at the Vicarage, sir? I'd ha' stopped him if I'd known, and had him searched, but he seemed harmless enough.'

'No,' said Nugent, 'it's all right, I noticed him last night and had some talk with him, that was all.'

Now that he knew that Allen had gone he felt relieved to be thus spared any further responsibility. The fellow was worthless, 'on his road,' as he had said himself, 'to the devil'; it was better, since he would not be stopped, that he should take his shame and degradation

elsewhere. This last outbreak of his seemed to justify Orme in his disgust, to remove the sting of his self-reproach.

He would go and see Margot, and find out from her what purpose, if any, Allen had had in seeking her, and what had occurred. She would tell him, of course, of her own accord, and he could relieve her mind of any fear of being again molested by giving her the news of Allen's departure.

He had to wait a little while before she came down to see him, looking paler than usual. She admitted that she had had a wretched night, the storm had kept her awake—what torrents of rain! and surely there had been some thunder—had not he heard thunder? did he get home before it began?

She talked fast and nervously, with a forced animation; he fancied that she avoided meeting his eyes, that she tried to keep the conversation upon indifferent topics. He had meant to leave it to her to make the first mention of Allen's brief re-appearance, but, as she showed no intention of doing so, he was driven by a growing impatience to say: 'Has anything happened while I have been away?'

She laughed. 'My dear Nugent! you forget that you only went away on Monday, the day before yesterday! I am glad the time seems so long to you, but what *should* happen in two days—and here?'

'Then you have nothing to tell me—about yourself, I mean?'

'Do you want a full account of all my doings? I'm

afraid it won't be very interesting. On Monday, Miss Momber called, just when I wanted to do my flowers, and in the afternoon I went to tea with the Eddlestone girls. On Tuesday, my step-father went away and he hasn't come back yet. Lettice and I went for a long ride in the morning and played tennis all the afternoon. In the evening—well, in the evening it rained, which you know already. That is all, Nugent. Oh, and the benefit club had its festival yesterday, and the band frightened Harebell.'

He asked no more just then; he knew from her manner that she had seen and spoken with Allen. She had her reasons for concealing what had passed—he would not give way again to the old distrust—but, oh, why could she not confide in him?

And the double consciousness of something withheld produced an embarrassment and constraint between them for the first time since their engagement.

'How stupid we both are to-day!' exclaimed Margot at last; 'it is this horrible weather, I suppose—the rain has only left the heat worse than it was. Let us go round the garden, Nugent, and see how my poor roses have suffered.'

They went round together; the gardener's boy passed wheeling a barrow containing the litter that had been made during the night, and Margot stopped and spoke to him.

'What have you got in that barrow, Tom,' she said. 'Leaves?'

'Leaves and all sorts, miss,' said Tom, putting down

his barrow to touch his hat; 'had a job to clear it all up too, miss—this is the second barrerful; got it all swept up now, miss.'

'And what do you do with it all, Tom?'

'Bonfire, miss, got it burning now in the yard.'

'Very well, Tom, you can go on,' said Margot. They were opposite the summer-house now, and Orme thought he saw her glance at it as she passed with a slight hesitation. 'Shall we sit down?' he proposed.

'There!' she said, with a little shiver. 'No, indeed. I was thinking what a hideous little place it looked, and how I should like to have it pulled down!'

Orme said nothing, but it instantly rushed to his mind that it was there that she had met Allen the night before.

'I am grateful to the rain for one thing,' she said presently, 'it has put off the picnic. Even Pussie Eddlestone quailed at the idea of having afternoon tea in a swamp, so she has written to fix to-morrow instead. I am so glad, for I don't think I could have borne it to-day. I hope I shall be better to-morrow. You will come, too, Nugent, of course? There will be plenty of room for you in the waggonette. Lettie is going in Millicent's pony-trap.'

'How will you go?' he asked.

'I shall ride, I think.'

'Then I will ride too,' he said; 'I can get a horse at the hotel stables, and we can go together.'

He fancied that her assent was not so enthusiastic as it might have been; and soon after, seeing that she was suffering still, and that her replies became more and more languid and perfunctory, he left her with a heavy heart, wishing that he could have found the courage to tell her what he knew, and yet trying to convince himself that it was his duty to be patient and await her pleasure.

By the next day, however, his mind was more at ease; he would have an opportunity of speaking to her while they were riding together, and this time he would not allow her to baffle him. He saw what the case was—that coward had been working on her sympathies, making her feel that she was the cause of his wretchedness. Well, it ought not to be difficult to convince her that her pity was thrown away, her responsibility of the remotest degree.

It was a lovely afternoon—the sky a deep blue, mottled with trails of pure white, the air clear, the landscape refreshed and rejuvenated by the much-needed rain—when Orme dismounted at the steps of Agra House. Margot's mare had been brought round, and Margot herself was not long in making her appearance.

She was a sight to rejoice any eyes, to say nothing of a lover's, as she came down the steps with a smiling nod of welcome to him, and stood there caressing and talking confidentially to Harebell. And yet, when he had put her into the saddle and they were riding through the gates together, he noticed that her eyes still had that strained look of apprehension, and that

her cheeks had lost all vestige of colour. She talked gaily enough and declared herself quite recovered, but he fancied that as before there was an effort in her animation.

'We had better trot on,' she said, after they had got clear of the village, 'or we shan't catch up the others—they started ever so long ago.'

'Is it absolutely necessary to catch them up?' objected Orme.

'They will expect it. But, of course, if you would find trotting at all inconvenient——'

'I am not afraid of falling off,' said Nugent with a laugh, 'if you mean that.'

'I only said that to tease you,' she answered, with a side glance which spoke her approval of his appearance; 'you look rather well on a horse, do you know, Nugent? But really we ought to go on. The Holly Bank waggonette isn't even in sight yet.'

For some time they trotted on, exchanging remarks at intervals, until on a hill far in front they saw the glitter of varnished panels in the sun.

'We needn't hurry now,' said Orme, 'there's the waggonette, and, yes, that's Millicent and Lettice in the pony carriage behind them. As long as they see us, that will do, and—and I want to tell you something, Margot.'

She checked her mare instantly. 'Wait till I have told you something first,' she said, 'I forgot it yesterday, and I know you will be interested.'

It was better that she should tell him; he felt

ashamed once more to have doubted that she would do so. 'Tell me your news first,' he said.

'Ida is engaged to Guy Hotham. It was all settled at Homburg, and they will be at home in a few days now. Nugent, do you think Lady Adela will object—*could* she?'

His face fell; he had hoped that she was about to tell him something very different, but she seemed so earnest, so absorbed in the subject that he could not pass it off just then. Perhaps—it occurred to him for the first time—Allen had lied, she had not seen him, did not even know that he had been there.

At last his opportunity came. 'You don't ask me for my news,' he said, 'and yet, if you don't know it already, I think you will be a little startled. Margot, on Tuesday night I saw Allen in Gorsecombe.'

'You—saw Allen?' she repeated with bloodless lips. 'Nugent—did you speak to him, did he tell you anything—why he had come?'

'He said he had come to see you, that he had seen you in the garden. Margot, why did you keep that from me?'

'Why did I? Oh, Nugent, I've dropped my whip! Will you get it for me, please—I will hold your horse. . . Thanks very much; and now, see, Pussie is waving a handkerchief at us from the waggonette—they will all begin waving directly, like a school treat! We must get on, really.'

'Answer my question first,' he said; 'why did you say nothing about Allen?'

'Because it could do no good; it was not a pleasant subject to talk about.'

'That I can understand—but not why you didn't mention it to me. Surely, Margot, there should be no secrets between us now!'

'I—I tried to tell you, I could not—not at once. I—I thought you would blame me.'

'Blame you—for what?'

'It was stupid of me, wasn't it? But it made me nervous, Nugent. I never used to be nervous—but it is a little your fault. I never know how you will look at things, and it frightens me!'

Orme was deeply hurt. 'I am sorry I give you that feeling,' he said coldly; 'I thought you had more confidence in me than that.' And, without another word, they rode on till they came up with the rest of the party.

'We quite thought you had had an accident,' screamed Pussie Eddlestone, 'didn't we, mamma? We were nearly sending Mr. Fanshawe back to see what had become of you. I had visions of Margot being run away with, and Mr. Orme going home on a hurdle. Now you *have* caught us up, do keep with us, like good people—it makes it so much cosier!'

Whatever additional cosiness could be derived from calling out small talk at the top of her voice and making encouraging sounds to the horses was afforded to Miss Eddlestone for the remainder of the drive. A little later they reached the place where they had arranged to picnic—a beech wood surrounding a chain

of three miniature lakes—a favourite spot for such expeditions.

The Eddlestone girls bustled about, discussing the best sites, organising stick-collecting parties, and unpacking provisions with the noisiest energy ; the jokes were as mild, the tea as smoky, and the discomfort as undeniable as they generally are on these occasions.

At any other time, Orme would have found enjoyment, notwithstanding, in the scene—the warm, peaceful afternoon, the bright figures grouped in the shade by the satiny grey beech trunks, and beside them the olive green water, ringed here and there by a rising fish. But he was too oppressed to do so then, or to take more than a very half-hearted part in the general gaiety. What he had just learnt had sorely disquieted him. He did not suspect Margot, even then, but he watched her with a sad wonder as she sat there, laughing and talking with that feverish brilliancy in her eyes.

He had thought he possessed her entire confidence, that their mutual understanding was perfect—and now she had kept this harmless secret from him, out of fear. Margot, who seemed so proud and fearless, afraid of him! Why? Was it his own fault? How could he repair it?

Presently Lettice came to him. 'Nugent,' she said in a whisper, 'come and help me to get some water-lilies, there are some on the other pond—quick, before the others see us! We'll pretend we are just going for a little walk, and look quite careless about it—then they

won't suspect anything. Give me your hands, I'll pull you up—oh, what a weight you are!'

Nugent let her drag him off by an elaborately circuitous path. 'Can you row?' said Lettice. 'You can? Then there's a boat in a little house down there—we'll get it—*do* let us.'

The rest of the party began to disperse—Mrs. Eddlestone, who was not of active habits, remaining to pack up, Mr. Fanshawe going off with Fay in search of ferns, Millicent and Dottie carrying the remains of the feast to the coachman. Pussie Eddlestone drew Margot's arm in hers and strolled round the edge of the lake. 'Hasn't it been jolly?' she said. 'Though, to be sure, we might have had a few more men. Would any one think Mr. Fanshawe was such fun, to hear him in the pulpit? It would be nice if he took a fancy to dear Fay, wouldn't it? By-the-bye, dearest, have you settled yet when *your* wedding is to be? You'll let us be your bridesmaids, won't you?'

'Nothing is settled yet, Pussie. Perhaps my wedding never will be.'

Something in the tone of the reply made good-natured, inquisitive Pussie open her eyes. 'Why, Margot, what a thing to say! I thought you were such a happy couple! He was looking rather glum all through tea, now I remember. Have you fallen out with one another, or what?'

'No—no,' said Margot impatiently; 'only one can never be sure of anything in this world, happiness least of all!'

She was standing by one of the lakes as she said this, looking with clouded, serious eyes out to the middle of the water, where Nugent was sculling lazily about under Lettice's orders. Now he was leaning forward and talking to her, in so low a voice that the words were not carried to the bank. If he was questioning her about last night—if Lettice forgot her promise! Well, it was Fate—she was powerless. And though she seemed to see nothing, she was conscious all the time of every detail in the scene before her. Orme's fine and rather severe face, and Lettice's eager one; the liquid dazzle on the wet sides of the boat; the golden green of the beechwood, and in the background a pine-clad hill with the red trunks gleaming redder in the level sunshine.

'What makes you so awfully morbid, dear?' said Pussie. 'If I were lovely like you, and engaged to be married to some one who adored me, I wouldn't be afraid of unhappiness coming—at least I would wait till it did come!'

'Don't envy me, Pussie. You wouldn't if you knew! What am I saying? You are right, I was morbid. And after all, if one once really loves it isn't easy for anything to destroy that love, is it?'

'Now what has anyone been telling you against Mr. Orme? Don't believe it, Margot, whatever it is. Why, we've known him ever since we were children together, and, besides, can't you *feel* it isn't true! What did they say, dear?'

Margot laughed a little drearily. 'How ridiculous

you are! Do you think I want to be assured that Nugent is faultless? No one has ever told me anything to his discredit, and if they did— Ah, I should shock you if I finished my sentence.'

Just then she would almost have welcomed the discovery of anything in him which put him on a lower level, which would lessen his right to condemn her. She felt surer of her ability to forgive him, than his to excuse her. Did he know already, and how much? If she were to tell him this very evening, as they were riding home, he might help her, counsel her what to do; on the other hand—she would risk everything. She could not foresee what view he might take, what act of reparation he might insist upon. Still, as she went back to the spot where Mrs. Eddlestone was still placidly dozing by an unpacked basket, she had almost resolved on unburdening her conscience before nightfall.

Lettice had made no perilous confidences while in the boat. Orme was incapable of inviting them, and she was mindful of her promise, from a persuasion that Allen's return was connected in some mysterious way with her silence.

So when he and Margot were on their way home, he was as unenlightened as before.

There was some delay in saddling the horses, and the vehicles were far in advance when they mounted, but this time neither showed any inclination to hurry.

'Nugent,' began Margot, 'I—I want you to tell me

exactly what happened that night when you met —him.'

'Why should you wish to know?' he said; 'he is gone—he went off to London next morning, he is not likely to trouble you again . . . let us forget him.'

Her face lost some of its anxiety, but she was not entirely satisfied. 'Still, I should like to know, Nugent,' she said, bending over to take her handkerchief from the saddle-pocket. 'Tell me.'

Seeing that she would not be put off, he told her everything but Allen's parting words. Her eyes were fixed on him and he saw her face slowly assuming an expression that startled him by its suppressed tragedy.

'You told him that!' she said in a low voice. 'Oh, Nugent, what have you done—what have you done?'

'Don't look like that, dearest!' he said; 'I was wrong, I know. I only meant to prove to him that I knew the worst there was to know. If he had come back with any honest purpose he would not have resented it so; but he is a thorough scoundrel. He left me in order to go and get dead drunk in some low taproom. I heard that afterwards. What could anyone do to help such a fellow as that?'

Margot's face was turned away from him towards the gorgeous western sky, with its contrasts of saffron and heather, rose and lapis lazuli, seen above the bronzed purple of the slopes across the valley. Her time had come—she must speak now; but she kept her face averted as she did so and the words seemed forced from her by some agency stronger than herself. 'Ah,

Nugent!' she cried, almost inaudibly; 'if—if he were *innocent*?'

'Innocent! I don't understand,' said Orme.

'Why won't you—without words? If he did not really steal that locket——!'

'How can that be, if it is true that he was actually caught in the act? Did you not tell me so that evening at Taplow?'

'Did I say that? I ought to have said that he was found with the locket in his possession—*that* was true enough.'

'But you meant me to understand that he stole it, didn't you?' She made no answer—her graceful head dropped a little more.

'Which story am I to believe—that or this? Margot, do you think I hesitate for a moment? I know you too well for that. How could you imagine I could believe you capable of such cold-blooded wickedness—such mean, hateful treachery!'

'I only said *if* Allen were innocent, Nugent!' she said faintly.

'I know,' he replied; 'you spoke out of some generous impulse to shield him, to make excuses for him. You felt, very likely, that you might have done more than you did; you were touched when you saw him in that degraded, desperate state. But you didn't see—how should you?—what such a defence as that involved, or you would never have hoped that I should believe it! If I once believed that Allen was innocent, I should believe much more—I could not help myself, Margot.

Thank God, I am too sure of you for that! I know that if you were really convinced of his innocence you would not have sent him away, you would not have tried to conceal his return, you could not, or you would not be Margot—not *my* Margot!'

'And—if I had done all that,' she said, 'would you hate me?'

'If you had done that,' he replied, 'I should not hate you, I suppose, even then—but I would never see you again if I could help it. I should try not to think of you; or if I did think of you it would be as one I had loved and who was dead.' She stole a look at his face as he spoke, and shuddered; his eyes were stern, the lines of his lips had grown rigid at the mere thought; the sunset touched his features with a radiance which seemed to render his face unfamiliar and almost terrible to Margot just then.

But the next moment he was smiling into her conscience-stricken face with all the old tenderness. 'See what you might have accomplished by that quixotic plea of yours!' he said. 'Luckily for me—and you too, you poor, impetuous darling,—you have failed to convince me in the very least!'

Margot gave a long sigh. 'Yes—I have failed,' she said. 'I will not try again. And, Nugent, whatever I am—you *do* love me now? Tell me so again!'

There was something infinitely pathetic to him in the humility of the exquisite face that was uplifted to his own. He bent and kissed her passionately on her tremulous, proud lips; his arm was around her slender

form. 'I love you!' he said—'I love you with all my heart and soul; you cannot really doubt that, Margot? Whatever you say against yourself, I know that you are generous and true and tender-hearted. Forget all my old miserable fault-finding—your instincts were right, mine were wrong. Darling, I am not worthy of you—who would be? But at least—at least I love you!'

He released her and they rode on in silence, Margot smiling to herself in the dusk with a half-bitter, half-melancholy self-application of two lines from 'The Last Ride Together'—

> So one day more am I deified,
> Who knows but the world may end to-night?

Presently they came to a stretch of level turf. 'Nugent!' she cried, 'Harebell has been so good, and she is dying for a canter!' And before Nugent could remonstrate, she was flying over the common and he had nothing to do but follow.

'Isn't it glorious!' she said, as they pulled up some minutes later. 'I didn't think your horse would have kept up with Harebell.'

'It was not a very safe thing to do,' said Nugent. 'You couldn't possibly have seen a trench or a rabbit-hole in this light!'

She laughed a little wildly. 'Perhaps that was why I did it!' she said.

CHAPTER VI

LITERA SCRIPTA

York. Peruse this writing here, and thou shalt know
The treason that my haste forbids me show.
Aum. Remember, as thou read'st, thy promise past
I do repent me; read not my name there,
My heart is not confederate with my hand.
Rich. II. A. 5.

CHADWICK returned unexpectedly on the evening of the picnic, and Margot met him at breakfast next morning. 'So I'm to have the blessing of seeing my family around me at last!' he remarked, with one of his ugly sneers. 'Your dear mother writes me she is coming home. Returning with flying colours, too, and a prisoner of war—oh, don't look at me like that—you know all about it! I shall take care to let Lady Adela know *I've* had no hand in it. This young Hotham must be a chuckle-headed chap to be caught by Miss Ida. I ought to be a proud man—stepfather-in-law to a future baronet! I shall hold up my head with the county-folk now. If that boy of mine hadn't turned out a good-for-nothing rogue, he might have made up to Miss Hotham and we should have been a snug family party. Ah, you may curl your lip if you like—

though it doesn't come well from you, however grand you may think yourself, young lady!'

'Why do you say such things to me?' the girl protested in a low voice. 'I am very far from being inclined to sneer at anyone just now.'

'Allen's beneath your notice, eh? Well, you got him turned out and you can afford to let him alone now. He's done for himself with me and gone to the bad, and I don't so much as know whether he's alive or not. I've got a set of dutiful, well brought-up children, who are everything they ought to be, and one of them's going to marry into a county family—that ought to content me, I daresay. And yet, you'll think it very low and vulgar in me, very likely—but there are times when I'd rather have a boy of my own. There are times when, if that poor, shiftless scamp were to come back and say he was sorry like a man, I do believe, though I've struck him out of my will and called him all the hard names I could think of—I do believe I should be fool enough to forgive him! It's something, after all, to have a creature of one's own flesh and blood to care for one.'

'Have you ever encouraged us to show you any affection?' she said. 'You do not care for us.'

'I'm not complaining. I married with my eyes open. I daresay folks would say all the hardship was on *your* side of the house. But if I find my amusements where I can get 'em—and God knows that isn't at home!—I don't interfere with you; you have all the indulgences other girls have—dresses, parties, as good

a bit of horseflesh to ride about on as any in the county, and no money spared on any of you, and all I get in return is black looks for it!'

Margot's eyes had a heartbroken look of appeal in them. 'Don't say that!' she implored him with trembling lips; 'it is not kind—it is not true. . . . I *am* grateful. I do feel that you treat us well. . . . I wish—I wish I deserved it!'

He had expected a very different reply, and this disconcerted him. 'I wasn't thinking so much of you,' he said lamely. 'You're the best of 'em—you and the little girl; it's Ida who puts my back up. . . . Don't mind what I said, I'm out of sorts this morning. There, you've not done anything, at all events. It's all right!'

This unusual kindness, rough as it was, smote Margot to the heart; it was long before she recovered from the effect of that interview—she was nervous, afraid of herself all day. She was even glad that she had promised to spend that evening at the Vicarage; her fear of being alone again with Nugent was nothing to her dread of another *tête-à-tête* with her step-father.

She felt almost happy at the Vicarage; there was something comforting in being treated with all that admiring affection, even though she knew that it might pass away only too soon. Margot was more irresistible than usual that evening, pathetically grateful for the most trifling kindness, docile and subdued, to a degree that won Mrs. Orme's complete approval. 'I must say,' she remarked to Millicent in the drawing-room after dinner, 'being engaged has had an excellent effect on

Margot, she is *so* improved—so much more gentle than she was!'

'Much,' agreed Millicent, but she said it with a little sigh. 'I wish she looked a little happier,' she was thinking; 'is she finding out that she has made a mistake in her feeling for Nugent? I wonder if she is telling him so now out there, poor fellow; and he loves her so dearly! Why could she not have left him alone?'

Millicent wronged her. Just then, Margot, as she paced the lawn with Nugent in the mystical green light, had never loved him more, never felt so intense a satisfaction in the consciousness of being beloved. She said but little herself, no more than was sufficient to draw forth stronger and tenderer assurances of all she was to him than he had ever spoken yet. She needed them all; they gave her strength and courage; in spite of his words yesterday, she began to hope that this power she possessed over him, making his strong voice tremble with repressed passion, would survive any disclosure she might make. She would be herself still, unchanged but for one thing; could he leave her, and never see her face again, as he had said? Then she remembered that, for far less cause, he had been ready to withdraw from her before: why imperil her whole happiness now by revealing what there might even yet be no necessity that he should ever know?

No, she could not; the present hour was sweet, she would enjoy it; if it was not to last, she would have it afterwards to look back upon—this last evening

with Nugent in the shadowy garden, with the scent of late Mary lilies and stocks in the air, and all forms and foliage confused and softened in a mellow haze.

Yet, though she could not decide to tell him, she was equally unable to keep away altogether from the dangerous topic, as though she sought yet for some favourable opening, or wished to commit him to some self-contradiction.

'Why do you doubt me like this, darling?' he said at last. 'Why can't you believe once for all that nothing you could do would alter my love?—it *is* so!'

'*Nothing*, Nugent? When you said yesterday that, if I had sent Allen away knowing he was innocent, you would—leave me!'

'*If* you had done so—yes. I was safe in answering that, because I know perfectly well that that is just one of the things you simply could *not* do. Margot, can't you forgive me yet for mistrusting you before? I *did* distrust you, to my eternal shame, but that was before I knew you as I do now, and even then, I never once thought or could have thought you a traitress.'

'Oh, and I was not—indeed I was not!' she cried.

'No,' he said. 'I think you are too proud for that. So you must not persist in supposing yourself guilty of these imaginary crimes, and asking me what I should do, or you will end by believing in them yourself. I don't want to be too hard on that poor fellow, but, from your own account, he could not be innocent—you could not even believe, to say nothing of knowing, he was so under the circumstances. He may come back

and reproach you as much as he likes—though I should not advise him to do it if I am near—but the responsibility for what he is now is not on you. I have told you all this before; and now I have seen him myself and heard of his later proceedings, I feel even more certain than I did that he was an irreclaimable scamp, and that in insisting on his leaving you did only what you were perfectly justified in doing. So you must think no more about it. Are you cold out here, darling? No? I thought that was unlikely on such a magnificent night. How splendid the moon looks between those two cedar boughs! What a curious shape, too—that tilted oval!'

'Yes,' said Margot; 'it looks like a cold shining death-mask hung up there.'

'Not a particularly cheerful simile. You are almost as bad as Heine's philosopher friend, who said the stars were only a brilliant eruption on the face of heaven!'

'Did he?' said Margot absently; 'how unpleasant of him; but it is rather ghostly out here, Nugent, don't you think? Let us go back to the drawing-room, and I will sing to you, if you are good.'

They found Mrs. Orme reading a letter which had just been delivered. 'Oh, Margot,' she began, 'perhaps *you* can tell me what I ought to do about this? I've just had a letter from a Mrs. Melladew, who says she used to be Mrs. Chadwick's governess. She wants to know if she my use may name as a reference—she is taking pupils and very anxious to be recommended. *I*

should have thought she would write to your mother. I know nothing about her, except that she accompanied songs sometimes at our Penny Readings. So far as I remember she played with some taste and correctness.'

'She did not behave very well about leaving,' said Margot. 'I suppose that was why she did not like to ask mother to recommend her—and of course,' she added, 'she will be glad to have your name. She *did* teach the piano very well. I think you might safely do what she asks.'

'I look upon giving a reference as a very serious thing,' said the Vicar's wife importantly—'a very serious thing indeed. I could not recommend her at this distance of time without having a personal interview and finding out what she intends to teach and how far she is qualified to do so. I shall write and tell her that, if she likes to come down and see me, I will let her know, after I have put a few questions, how far I can conscientiously allow my name to be used. Yes, that will be far the best way. I don't suppose she will really come all the way from town, and I shall feel I have done all that can be done.'

She sat down to her writing-table to carry out this design, whereupon Nugent claimed the fulfilment of Margot's promise. She went to the piano, and he sat near, where he could watch her face as she sang. She had chosen that daintiest and tenderest of modern love-songs, 'The Devout Lover,' possibly with a sad prevision of its future irony. She had only sung one verse, when the Vicarage maidservant entered. 'There's a

young person outside,' she said to her mistress, 'who wants to speak to Mr. Nugent.'

'She must mean the Vicar,' said Mrs. Orme, turning round from her letter; 'it can't be *you*, Nugent. Say the Vicar is away at a parish meeting, and won't be back till late, will you, Ellen?'

'The young person said most particular, please ma'am, that it was Mr. Nugent she wished to see.'

'Oh,' said Nugent; 'I'd better go and see what it is, mother; I shan't be a moment.'

He rose and went out.

'It's Miss Margot's maid, sir,' said Ellen. 'She didn't wish it mentioned in there. I've shown her into the study.'

In some wonder as to what this young woman could possibly want with him, Nugent entered his father's room. There, at one side of the Vicar's table, with its litter of parish accounts, sermon paper, and divinity books, sat Susan, nervously twisting the long ends of her mantle. 'I hope I've not taken a liberty, sir,' she began; 'but there's things as can't be said on the house-tops—and I should be glad of the favour of your advice.'

'Really,' said Nugent, 'I am not qualified to advise you. I think my father—unless,' he added, 'it's any legal trouble you're in?'

'It's nothing of that sort, thank you, sir. I've come to you, knowing that you used to be a good friend to Mr. Allen when he was living at home.'

Orme sat down. 'Well?' he said.

'Perhaps you wasn't aware, sir, that he was back here the other night?'

'I am quite aware of that: he has gone away again —what of it?'

'I don't know if Miss Margot mentioned that she had a talk with him while he was here.'

'Miss Chevening mentioned that, too—naturally,' said Orme. For an instant the girl's face fell unmistakably, but only for an instant.

'You see, sir,' she continued, 'what I should like your advice upon is this: I never was so set against Mr. Allen as some people. I always said it was a case of give a dog a bad name; and when he was sent away to Injia on a sudden, I had a feeling it was all on account of something he was thought to have done, though it was kept very quiet—even us servants didn't know nothing for certain. And it wasn't till only the other day as I found out what that something really was. Mr. Allen was sent away for stealing joolery belonging to Miss Margot—which he no more done, sir, than what I did myself, and I can prove every word I say!'

'I am very glad to hear it, and so I am sure will Miss Chevening be—if you *can* prove it, there's no reason for any hesitation that I can see.'

Susan's eyes glittered. 'That's what you say now, sir,' she said; 'but I've myself to think of. I'd like to see Mr. Allen righted, but if it's to cost me my place——'

'If you are afraid of your master, I will undertake

to see it done without bringing you into the matter—that is, if you have any real proof; your mere word is nothing, I need not tell you, in a case like this.'

'Thank you, sir, I'm sure. I *have* got a proof beyond my words, or I shouldn't be here. And I want you to promise as you'll lay it before Mr. Chadwick yourself, which is more than I durst do myself!'

'I will tell you when I have seen it. First of all—what is it, and where is it?'

'I've got it wrapped up in my dolman, sir; and I'd like to tell you, before I let you see it, how it came into my hands, and then you'll see why I'm not putting myself forward beyond what I can help. Mr. Allen asked me to get Miss Margot to come down to the summer-house and speak to him, which she done, for I see her set out.'

Orme began to feel uncomfortable; he did not know why, for he had already guessed that the meeting took place in that particular spot: perhaps it was a certain suppressed tigerishness in this woman's expression, a conviction of coming triumph, that he did not like.

While this conversation was going on, Margot had been softly finishing the song in the drawing-room opposite—he heard the last line dying away as he sat there, waiting for Susan to proceed—

'And worship her in whispering humbleness.'

Susan was still hesitating, probably editing and revising her proposed revelations.

'If you happened to overhear what passed at that

interview,' said Nugent, 'you may spare yourself the trouble of saying anything more—because I shall not listen.'

She flushed with indignant virtue. 'I should scorn such actions,' she said; 'it was—it was the day after, and I was walking round the grounds after tea, when I see some scraps of paper on the floor of the summer-house. I thought I knew the writing, and it was a pity to leave it laying about where it might be read, so I picked them all up, and something made me piece 'em together like, just to see if they made sense. When I read it, there—you might have knocked me down with a feather! It was as clear as daylight as Mr. Allen was as innocent as a child! . . . Sir, Mr. Nugent, let me go on: let me tell you how it was—if you're truly his friend it's your bounden duty to hear me out—that letter was written, asking, begging, and praying of him to ake that locket out of Miss Margot's drawer and——'

'Give me the letter,' said Nugent.

'If I do, sir, you won't let Miss Margot get hold of it? You see, if she tore it up once, she'll as likely as not burn it next time she——'

'Miss Margot burn a letter! What in God's name are you talking about? What do you mean by talking this impertinence—to me?'

'Of course I can't expect you to believe *my* word, sir; though I ought to know her writing by this time—but here's the letter to speak for itself. I've pasted it together on foreign paper, as you may see.'

'*Her* letter!' cried Orme, falling back, deadly white, in his chair. 'Do you think if I had known that I would have heard you so far?—do you think I will read a line of it after this? It is a damned forgery, this letter of yours, do you hear?'

'I hear you, sir, and I'm not surprised at your taking on, even to bringing yourself to use such language to me. But if it's a forgery, I should have thought that was all the more reason for looking at it. I'm sure I've no interest one way or the other, as your own sense ought to tell you.'

Nugent turned upon her. 'I don't believe you,' he said; 'you *have* an interest; you have not come here to ask advice, you have made up your mind what to do already—hold your tongue, and put that precious paper in your pocket again! You have some devilish scheme of your own in all this; you may really believe you have got hold of something that compromises Miss Chevening, or you may be acting with a confederate for all I know. Listen to me, will you! I say you can make what use of that letter you like, so far as I or Miss Chevening are concerned. If you are acting under any other person's orders, let me warn you to take care what you do. Before you take any steps, think whether you may not find that you have ruined yourself without injuring Miss Chevening, which seems to be your main object. Conspiracy is an ugly thing to meddle with, remember. You say you want my advice —now you have it.'

'Then you won't even look at the letter, sir?'

'Am I to tell you that twice? Leave the house, and, before you decide to go on with this, count the consequences—that is all I have to say to you. You have been warned.'

Susan rose; she was pale, too, for she was more than a little shaken by the contemptuous rage she had provoked, and disconcerted as well by his insight into her motives; and yet, as he could not help noticing, she had not the bearing of a detected impostor. She was chagrined, spiteful, but not abject; he could not think she disbelieved in the genuineness of her evidence, or that she was in collusion with any other.

'I'm going, sir,' she said. 'I respect myself too much to notice the things you've thought fit to say. Whether you believe me or not, all I want is to see justice done, and if you won't help me, I must go through with it single-handed, that's all about it. And I might have known beforehand, if I hadn't been a fool, that it wasn't likely as you'd be anxious to see Mr. Allen righted *now* —it's natural you shouldn't, under the circumstances.'

'If a man were to say that to me,' said Nugent, 'I wouldn't answer for what I might do to him. As it is, you will go out of this house without another word!'

He rose and opened the door with such an expression that even Susan's feminine desire for the last word was quelled into silence, and she passed out, with her nose high in the air, it is true, but a heart that was secretly quaking.

'I wish *I'd* a young man as would stand up for me like that through thick and thin,' she was reflecting, on

her homeward way; 'that baker wouldn't—no, nor yet that young rip of a Barchard, for all the gentleman he thought himself! But Mr. Nugent will have it out with her, for all that. I've stopped her singing for a while, that's one comfort; she'll be on her knees to me next, and then it will be my turn!'

Orme dropped into his chair again, trying to think. With a shock of absolute terror he found himself yielding once more to doubts of Margot, and this time more hideous than any that Millicent had instilled. The flaws that had seemed fatal then to his love, now seemed venial by comparison. And yet—she had vindicated herself before; she would do so again. But he must know, he must ask—already the glow of indignant incredulity had died away; he was beginning against his will to remember, to compare, to balance probabilities. Only Margot could save him from this hell of doubt—and he could bear it no longer.

He went to the drawing-room, where she was still sitting with his mother and sister. Not daring to advance out of the shadow, he said, in as ordinary a voice as he could command, 'Margot, will you come into the study for a moment? I want your opinion about something.'

She followed him, with some smiling remark to Millicent in passing. He closed the study door upon them. 'What a wretched light to show anything by!' observed Margot, as she saw the one candle flickering in the draught from the open window. 'What is this wonderful object I am to admire, Nugent?'

He stood there by the book-cases, looking at her in her brilliant young beauty. What folly to believe that that sweet, stately innocence of hers had anything to conceal!

'An excuse to get you alone,' he said. 'Margot, I have just seen somebody who told me a very strange story.'

She looked strange and startled, with the light flickering over her face. 'A story!' she repeated. 'About what, Nugent?'

'About a letter that was written long ago—written and destroyed.'

She caught the window-curtain at her side, as if to save herself from falling. 'Ah!' she cried, 'I know now . . . it was Allen! He has come back to do this. Oh, the coward; the coward! Nugent, you must not believe it—you *will* not?'

'Why should you think it was Allen?' he said. 'It was not Allen, Margot, it was some one who hates you at least as bitterly—your own maid, Susan.'

'Susan!' And you listened to what she chose to tell you against me! Is that your trust, Nugent?'

'Don't reproach me till you have heard. She came to me with a story that Allen was innocent; that he was induced to take that locket by a letter making certain representations. I did not at first understand that you were personally concerned. I refuse to believe now that you knew of its existence. I trust you . . . only, if you love me, Margot, let me hear you say so yourself!'

'There is no such letter,' she said defiantly. 'You

have been deceived by a wicked girl. There is no such letter, Nugent. There cannot be!'

'Thank God!' he said, under his breath. 'I was sure of it, darling. I knew it was an infamous slander. I was so sure that I would not look at the letter that woman tried to show me.'

Her grasp on the curtain tightened. 'Susan tried to *show* you a letter!' she said faintly. '*What* letter, Nugent?'

'*The* letter. The letter which, according to her, brought about Allen's disgrace.'

'Did she tell you how it came into her hands?'

'The account she gave was that she picked it up in pieces by the summer-house in your grounds the evening after you saw Allen. Not a very probable story, is it? If you remember, we saw them clearing up the paths that morning.'

'She—she might have gone there early—before they began.'

'Then do you mean that she told the truth? *Was* there a letter? Was it torn up? If so, by whom?'

'Nugent, how *can* I tell? You ask so many questions.'

'You know nothing about it?'

'Have I not said so?—But these pieces, Nugent; these pieces—what did she mean to do with them? Why did she bring them to you?'

'She had pasted them together; she pretended that she was afraid to show it to your step-father herself, and wished me to do so.'

'And she left the letter with you? Where is it, Nugent?'

'I told you I refused to take it. She left declaring that she would do without my help. Good Heavens! Margot, what is the matter? What have I said?'

She was clinging to his arm, looking up into his face with wild, beautiful eyes! 'Nugent,' she said in a strained whisper, 'she means to show it to *him*—she hates me so . . . I know it now . . . she will do anything to injure me. And, Nugent, she must not—do you hear? She *must* be stopped! oh, say you will help me to get that letter back!'

He put her from him and held her by her wrists, so that he could see her face. 'Tell me the truth,' he said sternly. 'You *did* know of that letter?' Her hands writhed in his in the effort to free themselves and cover her shrinking face.

'Have pity on me, Nugent! Don't make me tell you!' she murmured.

He let her go abruptly. 'You need not tell me,' he said. 'I know now, and you thought *I* would help you to keep this secret? You knew and said nothing, would have said nothing—but for this!'

She had fallen into the chair occupied by her enemy a few minutes ago, and was making piteous efforts to collect her thoughts, to make her defence.

'I would have spoken soon,' she said; 'when I was able—indeed, indeed I meant to. . . . Nugent! don't you believe me?'

'No,' he said, 'I don't. I can't. When I think of

all you have told me, all lies—deliberate, unscrupulous lies—all that poor fellow has suffered; how I was led to side against him, drive him back to his despair, and you always silent, uncaring, except when you mentioned him with a lofty pity—my God! Margot, you have deceived me for the last time. . . I will never believe a word you say again!'

'I knew this would come,' she said, speaking like one in a trance. 'I said so—that first evening of all, on the balcony—do you remember? I knew you would be a hard judge. You always were a little hard to me. And just now in the garden, while you were telling me how dear I was, I knew, I knew! You are right, I suppose. I always told you I was not good. I have been wicked, hard, unjust—now I am punished for it. All I can do now, Nugent, is—is to set you free. . . . This is the end of everything between us!'

'Yes,' he said; 'it is the end. But, Margot, there is more to do yet. You will do what little can be done to undo this wrong? You will tell your step-father everything now—this very evening? Surely there is no time to lose.'

'*She* may tell him!' said Margot. 'I cannot and will not say anything.'

'I will go with you,' he urged. 'I will stand by you—it is the one way I can serve you now. Margot, don't leave this accusation to be brought by your worst enemy! Even now you may gain your pardon by confessing. Can you leave Allen under this disgrace an hour longer?'

'My step-father would think my repentance came a little late,' she answered with a frozen smile. 'I shall confess nothing. If I can persuade that girl to be silent even for a little while, I shall. You see—I am desperate. If you are anxious to rescue Allen, denounce me yourself, Nugent!'

'You know I could not!' he said—'not unless I was certain that the truth would never come out otherwise. Then, Margot, I would. As surely as there's a heaven above, I would speak—rather than let such wrong go on; yes, if I had to kill myself afterwards! See, I give you a week. I shall stay here during that time, much as I would give to go away. If by the end of the week Allen's father does not know of his innocence—I will tell him myself.'

'What an heroic determination!' she said, with the ghost of her old mockery; 'but I think you will be spared such a painful necessity. It is something at least to know what you propose doing. I have two enemies now, it seems!'

He made a gesture of despair; at the moment he did very nearly hate her.

'You taunt me,' he said; 'but—God help me!—what am I to do? Your enemy I can never be, whatever you have done and are—I have loved you too well for that. But that shall not make me your accomplice!'

'Have I asked you to be? Yes, I remember—I did . . . that was before. Now I ask nothing. I will go on alone—act as I think best. We are not enemies—we are

not friends, only two people who have loved and found each other out in time.'

As she spoke these last words Millicent suddenly entered. 'Why, you disgracefully selfish persons!' she began lightly, 'are you aware that you have left us alone all the evening and that mamma has gone off to bed? . . . Nugent! . . . Margot!' she broke off, looking from one to the other; 'is—is anything wrong?'

'Nothing, dear Millicent,' said Margot, with a laugh that had a heartbreak in it, 'except that Nugent and I have discovered that we are unsuited to make one another happy, and have been telling each other so.'

'I know who made that discovery!' replied Millicent indignantly. 'Margot, you have no heart; you cannot value love when it is yours—you do not deserve that it should be wasted on you! Why is beauty given to people like you, I wonder?'

'I don't know indeed—for their more perfect happiness, perhaps? And, forgive me, Millicent, but I have really been reproached this evening as much as is good—even for me. So if you will let me have my things, I will go home.'

'You are not coming with me?' she said with lifted eyebrows, as she found Nugent preparing to accompany her.

'Yes,' he replied shortly. 'I can't let you go back alone. Margot, you won't insist on that!'

'I only insist on one thing,' she said—'that if you

do come, you will not speak to me ; I want to be left in peace—if there is any peace for me anywhere now ! '

And they went back to Agra House together without a word, each conscious of the shadow that walked between them in the silence.

CHAPTER VII

GAINING TIME

Als treulos muss er verachten
Die eigne Herzliebte sein ;
Als schimpflich muss er betrachten
Die eigne Liebespein.— *Heine.*

Oh, my Sweet,
Think and be sorry you did this thing !—*Browning.*

At the door of Agra House, Margot spoke for the first time since they left the Vicarage, and her words seemed the result of a deliberation arrived at during that silent walk.

'You are not going to leave Gorsecombe yet?' she began.

'I told you I should not,' he replied gravely, 'until——'

'Until you have satisfied yourself that I am humiliated enough!' she struck in with a momentary flash. 'Very well; but till that desirable end is reached, is it necessary that the whole village should know that we have decided to separate?'

'Not if you think otherwise,' he said. 'Millicent will say nothing till you wish.'

'If you must stay here—and I know you cannot trust me out of your supervision—let us keep up pre-

tences as long as we can. Oh, it will be ghastly, I know, but, I—I will make it as easy as I can for you—it will not be so bad as having all Gorsecombe speculating about us to our faces, will it? We need only be seen walking together occasionally; if we are a little silent, they will put it down to perfect happiness and understanding!'

The muscles in his face were twitching with repressed suffering as he answered her. 'I will do what you please, only—you talk of making it easy for me, Margot—if you are going to speak to me as you did just now, it will be more than I can bear!'

'Ah, but I am not. You must remember that it is hard for me too—it is a difficult situation just at first, between a girl who hates me and a man who only despises me. What I said was not quite in good taste, very likely. I shall get used to it all in time. By to-morrow, I daresay, you will find me a safe companion. That is, always supposing that Susan has not already set you free to depart. There, you can leave me for to-night at all events.'

His heart was wrung by the impulse to plead with her once more, to beg her to have pity on herself and on him, to cast away this cynical hardness of hers and own some sorrow for the great wrong she had committed, some willingness to make reparation. But he felt intimidated by those imperious eyes, and the haughty curve of her full lip; he could not move her, he felt weak enough even still to dread being moved by her, and so the words he had almost uttered died

unspoken, and he turned away into the darkness, to wrestle with his agony as he might.

Miss Chevening, still in the same state of unnatural composure, passed into the hall, and, contrary to her usual custom, looked into the study to bid good-night to her step-father, whose manner satisfied her that her secret was safe as yet. Then she went up to her room and rang for Susan.

Presently Susan appeared, demurely observant. 'Are you ready for me, Miss?' she inquired, as if nothing had happened to affect their relations.

'I hear,' said Margot calmly, 'you have been taking the trouble to play the spy upon me, Susan. I want to know how you came to find that letter.'

'Well, Miss, if you must know, I haven't been satisfied in my own mind about the way you treated Mr. Allen from the first. And when I knew as you and him was going to have an interview in the summer-house, I thought it was only right there should be some third party present, to see fair play like. So I made free to slip round by a backway through the shrubbery, and stood up behind the arbour.'

'And then I suppose you heard all that passed between us?'

'I made the most of my opportunities, Miss, certingly, and I don't deceive you. I heard quite enough to show me what had been going on. Then, as soon as it was safe to come out, I came—and there was the letter all tore to bits, which spoke for itself. And with all respect to you, Miss, that letter I mean to keep till

I have a chance of laying it before one who has the best right to see it!'

Margot's eyes lightened; if a wish could have killed, Susan would never have left that room alive, but it was necessary to keep calm, not to let this girl see that she could affect her in any way.

'What is your price?—for I suppose that is what you are coming to,' she said.

'My price, Miss? Really I beg your pardon, but I don't understand.'

'You do understand—you understand very well. What will you take to give up that letter? You had better be moderate. I—I am not very rich, still I have some money. Remember, no one else is likely to buy your wares.'

'You're making a mistake, Miss,' said Susan. 'I may be a poor servant girl, but I have my ideas of right and wrong for all that. No money that you nor yet no one else, if it was the Queen herself, was to offer would make me part with that letter, except to the proper quarter. I'm not to be tempted, Miss, so you may make up your mind to that.'

What might have been a genuine burst of honest indignation was spoiled by the malignity that was apparent in every word; yet Margot quailed and felt rebuked for the moment.

'You must hate me very much, Susan,' she said in a low voice. 'I wonder why?'

'If I hate you,' was the reply, 'which I don't say whether I do or don't, I've reason enough for it. You

think because you're good-looking, you're everybody and everythink. You'll have to be taught that right's right and wrong's wrong for you the same as everybody else. Who are you and your family, I'd like to know, that master's only son should be made to seem a thief and turned out to beg or starve to keep you from disgrace? If he's fool enough to let himself be plotted against and turned round your finger, I'm not, and I'll see justice done before many hours are over, I can tell you, Miss, whether you like it or not, if you went on your knees to me to make me shut my mouth!'

'That I shall certainly not do,' said Margot. 'You are a bad girl and you are doing this, not because you love justice, or even money, but because you hate me. I can see that, and I am not foolish enough to try to soften you. But I suppose even though you do hate me, you are not quite blind to your own interests, when you need not sacrifice the one to the other, so I am going to propose a bargain. I do not wish this to be known just yet—not till my mother is here, which will be in two or three days at the furthest. For every day that passes before Mr. Chadwick knows the truth, I will give you ten shillings; you see, that leaves you perfectly free to turn informer when you choose, only you can enjoy your revenge a little longer and earn money by it at the same time. If you refuse, you will be stupid, but that is your own affair.'

She might have been discussing some question of toilette, so calm was her manner, though her hands

were twisting convulsively in her lap. But her voice and her eyes were full of an indomitable spirit and a consummate disdain which had some effect even upon Susan, though avarice had a greater.

'I can try it, Miss, for a day or two, and see how it works,' she said, with more respect. 'I'm sure it's not my wish to make things more unpleasant than need be—'

'That will do,' said Miss Chevening. 'You can go. I don't want you near me any longer.'

When Susan had got out of the room she realised that her triumph had lacked completeness after all. She had not had the satisfaction of seeing her young mistress at her feet; she had not even wrung any appeal for mercy from those proud lips—which naturally increased her hate. Still, she would see her low enough before long, and in the meantime, there was no harm in getting what she could, in case the more substantial reward she hoped for should prove illusory.

Margot did not see Nugent the next day; but the day after that she met him coming out of the Vicarage. 'You have not kept your promise,' she said; 'but perhaps you were on your way to me?'

'I tried yesterday,' he said, 'and I—I could not—it was too much . . . so soon!'

'Let us begin our penance now, then—not that *you* have committed any sin. We *must*, Nugent. Miss Momber is looking at us over her window-blinds. If we separate here, it will arouse her suspicions at once—you owe so much to me!'

'I have promised my mother to meet Mrs. Melladew at the station and bring her back to lunch,' he said, in a constrained voice. He was looking worn and haggard, as if he had not slept much of late.

'Mrs. Melladew!' exclaimed Margot, and a new light, almost a hope, shone in her eyes. 'I had forgotten. Nugent, let me come with you. I must see her alone—you will let me, will you not?'

'Of course,' he said drearily, and they walked towards the Station Road together, silent—for what could he say to her, or she to him, that was not better unsaid now? She dreaded him as an embodied conscience; he saw beneath the fair and seductive mask a prodigy of unscrupulous, impenitent selfishness, and each read the other's thoughts. Only once he spoke, 'Has that woman acted yet?' he asked.

'Not yet. I think I have persuaded her to give me a little longer.'

'You are wrong to leave it to her to speak.'

'You have the remedy in your own hands.'

'I hope,' he said—'I hope to heaven you will not drive me to use it!'

'I cannot answer for what you may think fit to do, of course.'

That was all that passed between them, except that now and then they met persons they knew, a jovial country gentleman on his cob, or a well-meaning farmer or village-wife, who little guessed how *mal à propos* were their jokes and compliments. On the platform, while they were waiting for the train, Nugent

spoke again: 'Tell me only this—Margot, why are you so anxious to see this Mrs. Melladew just now, and alone?'

She turned her head away. 'I will tell you nothing—nothing any more,' she said; 'what is the use?'

'Does she know anything about—that letter?'

'Perhaps. It is enough, or ought to be enough, that I wish to see her. If you have any regard for me left at all, you will help me, not hinder me.'

The train came in, and Mrs. Melladew—a much older and more careworn-looking person than the sentimental, flighty-headed Camilla of old—got out of it. As she recognised Margot, she seemed confused, uncertain what to do, but the girl met her with a cool decision.

'Camilla, I heard you were coming, and I persuaded Mr. Orme to bring me to meet you. I have something to say to you in private—let us walk a little way down this lane, and Mr. Orme will wait here till we come back.'

Nugent waited with such patience as he could command. It seemed an endless time before they returned, but at length he saw them coming down the lane.

Margot seemed to be pleading, retracting, extenuating something she had said. Mrs. Melladew was flushed and trembling with indignation; she went straight to where he stood.

'Mr. Orme,' she began excitedly, 'before I go with

you to the Vicarage I want to know this: Has Miss Chevening dared to tell you that I— ?'

'Camilla, stop!' said Margot, interposing with pale face and burning hazel eyes. 'Control yourself. I have not said a word—indeed I have not! I—I made a mistake. I beg your pardon—what more can I do!'

'I assure you, Mrs. Melladew, that I have not been told anything. If you will allow me I would rather remain in ignorance of your conversation,' said Orme stiffly.

'Yes, yes,' said Margot eagerly. 'Pray, Camilla, pray let us forget it!'

'You never liked me!' returned Mrs. Melladew, on the verge of tears, 'and now—when goodness knows I find it hard enough to make a living!—you try to take away my character, to make me own to things I never did—no, nor dreamed of doing! *I* had no reason for getting rid of that poor young man—why should I?'

'I accuse you of nothing,' put in Margot. 'Why will you be so unreasonable? Have I not owned I was wrong?'

'Ah, you are afraid—you dare not face me out! Look at her, Mr. Orme; don't trust her, she is false and wicked—she would do anything to save her pride, and once I used to wish myself in her place. I would not be now for anything in the world.'

'You are only telling Mr. Orme what he knows already,' said Miss Chevening.

'Mrs. Melladew,' Orme broke in, 'don't let us make this scene more painful than it is already. I—I have

been obliged to hear lately many things that—that have changed my life. I wish to know no more. Let us forget this, and let me take you up to the Vicarage.'

'No,' she said; 'I can't now. I have been too much upset. Tell Mrs. Orme anything you please, that I missed my train, if you like. I will write and fix another day, but now I will go back at once.'

A train was just coming in, and she was able to carry out her intention, neither of the other two dissuading her. 'Margot,' she said, as they went towards the station, 'I always felt I behaved badly to poor dear Ida, in deceiving and leaving her as I did. My only excuse is that I was in love—foolishly in love. But you at least cannot reproach me. No, I won't shake hands with you. I hope I shall never see or hear of you again—you are a wicked and dangerous girl, but you will be punished some day. I think you must be punished already!'

Orme heard this, and also saw the effect it had upon Margot, who stood there without attempting to reply, looking miserable and even humiliated enough, but unrepentant still. Yet if her offence had been anything less, his heart would have softened to her then—that look of lonely, half-defiant misery only seemed to make her lovelier. Again he wondered how hardness and deceit could put on so fair an outside, that even now, when he saw her as she was, desperately striving to put off exposure by the most reckless and hopeless expedients—even now all her charm had not perished for him.

When they were alone together, he said earnestly, 'Can't you see that it is hopeless—that you are only injuring yourself by what you are doing?'

'Nugent,' she answered, 'don't preach. If I choose to injure myself, that does not concern you any more. I will not admit that it is hopeless—not yet.'

'It *is* hopeless—even if you had gained your object (I do not ask to know what it was) with Mrs. Melladew, even if you could bribe that girl Susan to spare you, you will not silence me, Margot. The wrong you have made Allen bear shall not go on—that I swear! His father must and shall be told the truth.'

She turned upon him—her eyes ablaze with anger. 'Do you mean that you will break your word, and tell him now? Nugent, if you do, I shall hate you. I very nearly hate you now, when you are so righteous and bitter against me; but if you do that, I shall *quite* hate you!'

'I am not in the habit of breaking my word,' he said coldly. 'I promised to wait. I wish—if you knew how I wish!—that you may save me from an odious duty, but when the time is up, if you have not spoken I will speak. I cannot help it if that makes me hateful to you.'

'It is only time that I want,' she said more gently; 'only time. I cannot—no, Nugent, I cannot—go to my step-father myself. Oh!' and she lifted her face to him with a sudden impulsive appeal that was well-nigh irresistible, 'if I was to tell you what excuses there are for me; why I acted as—as I have acted; what I fear now,

would you forgive me, Nugent? Would you think better of me? If I could only believe that, I would try once more!'

'You made excuses to me before,' he said, 'and they were false. I believed them then, I was too ready to believe when it was you who spoke. You drove that poor fellow from his home, you prevented him from coming back, you would have kept his innocence a secret even now if you could, you are still scheming to avoid acknowledging the truth. Nothing you can say will alter or excuse that, even if—'

'Even if you believed it,' she continued for him. 'Yes, I see, Nugent, it is really all over. I saw it in your face that evening, and then I resolved that it would be useless to try to move you. Why did I forget just now? Yes, you have lost faith in me, nothing will ever bring that back again. I have failed and I deserve to fail. Now let us part. I thought I could bear being with you, but the strain is too heavy for me; people must think what they like! I will not see you again until—until you come to do your duty in exposing me, unless I send for you first, and then, for the sake of old times, Nugent, you will not refuse to come to me. Leave me here to go on alone—it is better for us both!'

He stood aside, and watched her as she passed on along the road, her step as light and graceful as ever, her head proudly erect, much as he had seen her on the Trouville *plage* on just such an August day as this two years ago, before he had ever spoken to her or seen her face.

And now he wished with all his soul that he and she had never met, that he had been spared the mockery of a love, happiness, and faith which endured so brief a space and had such an ending as this.

. . . . . .

The days passed on somehow. Mrs. Chadwick was taking her homeward journey by easy stages, without having indicated, perhaps intentionally, any place on her route to which letters might be addressed. On Margot the dreaded blow had not fallen as yet, thanks to the piece of gold which Susan found every night upon her mistress's dressing-table, and which was accepted without comment on either side. Chadwick was surly at his wife's repeated delays, but nursed his wrath, in company with the spirit-decanters, till her return. Margot had to go on playing her part, to disarm the curiosity of the neighbours, at tennis parties, or at church, to bear herself as if she were not oppressed at all times by a terrible dread of what was happening at home. Often, in sheer despair, she was tempted to reveal all she knew, but the consequences appalled her. At last, the precariousness of her position became grimly familiar, she even forgot it at times—had she not, she would have gone mad. It is possible enough that Damocles himself began to recognise some flavour in the viands before the last course had been served.

And now her suspense was nearly at its natural end. To-morrow was the day which Nugent had fixed as the limit of his silence : that very morning Mrs. Chadwick

had telegraphed from Paris that she expected to arrive, with Ida, Guy, and Reggie, at Agra House late in the evening.

Margot was sitting in the great drawing-room with Lettice, whose gleeful impatience planted the last thorn in her sister's heart, waiting for the travellers to arrive; the carriage had already gone down to meet them, every sound from the front of the house seemed to be its returning wheels.

They had come at last. Lettice had run out to greet them. Margot, sick and faint, stood a moment in the room, irresolute, before following her into the hall.

Her mother did not see her at first, she was too busy in giving directions and asking questions in the intervals of kissing Lettice, who had thrown herself into her arms.

'Why, Lettie, you look quite a different child; all the pretty roses back again! I knew you would get well here sooner than at Homburg; and mother hasn't forgotten you, darling! The brown portmanteau and bag to go into the blue room, Masterman, please, and be careful with my trunks. Guy, dear, this is not Hawleigh, you know, but we will try to make you comfortable here. Margot, you quite frightened me, coming out like a ghost. How are you, sweet one? We thought of you in Paris—*such* a crossing! No, not that one; that's Miss Ida's. Where's Susan? Tell her to come instantly. Is papa in his study? Then I'll pop in and see him before I go up to my room.'

Her cheerful airy satisfaction and high good-humour, which even embraced her husband just then, struck Margot as in ghastly contrast with the danger that threatened.

'Margot,' complained Ida, pouting, 'you might say something to Guy; you might *look* as if you were glad to see us back again!'

There was something almost fierce in the elder sister's caress. 'Glad!' she cried. 'Oh if you knew how I have wanted you! And—and Ida, dear, I do hope and pray that you and Guy will—' she could not finish her sentence.

'That we shall be happy?' said Guy, as he wrung Margot's hand, looking very happy and handsome just then. 'No doubt about it, so far as I'm concerned, and she's learning to make the best of a stupid sort of fellow like me!'

'Oh, Guy!' protested Ida. 'I am very, *very* happy, Margot,' she whispered; 'so happy that I feel as if it couldn't last. Do *you* ever feel like that about Nugent?'

Margot did not reply, but her expression showed Ida that some hidden and terrible grief had entered into her sister's life since they had met last. 'Forgive me, darling, I didn't know,' she added hastily. 'You will tell me about it upstairs—won't you?'

'Yes, yes!' said Margot. 'There—there are several things I must say, Ida, when we are alone.'

Reggie, in all the importance of travelled boyhood, was enlarging to Lettice on his Continental experiences.

'It was jolly at that Homburg hotel, I can tell you, Lettie,' he informed her. 'I dined table-d'hôte every night—it didn't begin till your bedtime. And the Prince of Wales was there part of the time. I capped him when we met, just as I would one of the masters, you know, and he capped me. I don't think much of Germans, though, they sell beastly sweets. I like Paris. Guy bought me a stunning box of soldiers there, cavalry charging. Guy's a brick. It *was* rough in the steamer. Mother and Ida were ill, and even Guy wouldn't answer any questions properly. *I* wasn't ill in the least. A French lady said I was a regular little English sailor—it was more than *she* was, but she was better just then.'

'Did you have equi-noxious gales, Reggie?' asked Lettice, much impressed.

'There were gales all the way,' he said. 'They might have been those for all I know; you would have been sick if you had been there, I can tell you. How's old Yarrow?'

Mrs. Chadwick meanwhile had burst upon her husband. 'Well, Joshua, here we are back again. I hardly thought I *could* have come on from town to-night, we had such a terribly rough passage, but I made the effort. I felt I oughtn't to stay away a day longer than I could help. I felt that so very strongly!'

'Did you?' he returned. 'It has taken you a devil of a time to feel it, that's all I can say. Well, you're back now, and it will be my fault if you get the chance again for some little while. There are some bills I shall

want some explanation of from you, Mrs. Chadwick, when you've got over the effects of your journey.'

'Joshua!' she exclaimed, rather piteously. 'I have been away all this time, and you begin about bills the moment I come home. For goodness' sake, let us try to do without quarrelling for a little while—Guy Hotham is here.'

'What do I care for Guy Hotham, or Guy anybody?' he said. 'You've hooked him for your Ida—whether you can keep him on the hook is your look-out, not mine. What's he doing here? Why couldn't he go on to Hawleigh?'

'Because it is too long a drive so late at night,' she replied. 'Joshua, it can't hurt you to be civil to him, particularly as Lady Adela has really taken his engagement better than I expected; she has asked Ida to stay at Hawleigh next month. Really you might, on this very first night of all, try to take things a little more pleasantly, when they are going so well too!'

'I'm not going to use violence to the young man, am I? Keep him out of my way, that's all I ask. I don't want your swell friends here with their cursed haw-haw ways, treating me as if I was my own butler. There, go and take off your things and have some supper, it's laid out in the dining-room, and don't let anybody come in here and bother me, that's all I ask of you.'

She was not sorry to escape, and invent some pretext for preventing anyone, Guy in particular, from encountering her husband that evening, as his condition

was obvious enough. But even this did not damp her spirits very greatly, and at supper she was very much the most cheerful of the party.

At length Ida rose, declaring she could not keep awake any longer, and Margot accompanied her. At the door of her room, Ida offered to say good-night, but Margot declined to accept the hint. 'I am coming in with you for a few minutes, dear,' she said gravely.

'But I am really so awfully sleepy, Margot!' protested Ida, yawning to give effect to her words. 'Won't what you have to tell me wait till to-morrow?'

'No,' said Margot; 'it has waited too long already.'

Ida yielded rather pettishly, evidently without suspecting the nature of Margot's communication, and fearing, weary as she was with travelling, to be bored by demands on her sympathy for her sister's trials.

'Well,' she said, 'come in, then, but you must not stay more than five minutes, or I shall fall asleep in the middle of it.'

The two sisters were together for a much longer time than five minutes that night, but in the course of the interview Ida heard that which effectually removed all tendency to drowsiness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE COURAGE OF DESPAIR

If Margot found the suspense almost beyond her power to endure, it was not less terrible to Nugent Orme. Perhaps it was even more so, for she did occasionally succeed in shaking off the oppression of it—he, never. Millicent was still the only person at the Vicarage who knew that their engagement was at an end, and she was ignorant of the real cause, which he could not bring himself to tell her. Her great love for him inspired her with an unaccustomed tact in treating what she recognised as a sorrow which could bear no speech as yet. She summoned all her ingenuity to prevent her father and mother from noticing that anything was amiss, devising pretexts which should enable Nugent to be away for the greater part of every day, without exciting their remark, and shielding him in countless ways when he was with them.

This, the Vicar's easy-going indolence, which made him rarely observant of anything that was not forced upon his notice, and his wife's absorption in parish work, rendered easy enough. Millicent abstained from all questioning of her brother, notwithstanding a natural

desire to know whether the determination to part had come from him or Margot. At first, she had regarded Margot as a heartless flirt, who had chosen to captivate Nugent from sheer love of admiration, and dismissed him as soon as she was weary of his devotion—but that was only at first, and now, when reflection had made her almost certain that Nugent had discovered something that justified her own charge against Miss Chevening, she felt no triumph. Her original distrust of Margot had given way; when the intimacy between them had been renewed, she had been unable to resist the fascination of her beautiful friend, and whatever fault she had committed, she pitied, and would have been sincerely rejoiced to find excuses for her.

But Nugent evidently saw none, and had no hope of doing so; all her efforts to see Margot were repulsed; she could only wait and try to comfort herself with the thought that the disillusion, if it was to come, had not come too late.

What Nugent suffered he chose to suffer alone, and as the dreaded day drew nearer, and still there was no sign that Margot repented or intended to make any act of reparation, his mental torture grew more acute.

He shrank with loathing from the odious duty that might soon devolve upon him; he had pledged himself in a certain event to make disclosures which must expose the woman he loved to disgrace. Why had he done so? How much easier to hold aloof, to leave Allen's rehabilitation to fate or chance! But if Margot would

not speak, if she succeeded in silencing anyone who was able to denounce her, then Allen must surely be doomed to sink into lower depths from which it would be too late to rescue him—even now the horrible injustice of which he was the victim might be irremediable.

To be silent for the sake of sparing Margot's feelings would be conniving at a moral if not an actual murder. He had not the right to spare her, and yet—oh, God, if something might intervene at the eleventh hour to save him from taking action!

It seemed that his prayer was not to be granted; the morning came of the day which, before it closed, would decide whether he was equal or not to the task he had set himself. He would delay acting to the latest possible moment, do nothing till evening, and then he would go up to Agra House, and if Chadwick had not learnt the truth by that time, nothing should prevent him from speaking.

So he had decided as he sat under the cedar, feeling chilled to the marrow, though the sun was blazing down on the lawn, when he saw Guy Hotham coming towards him through the open window. He had already heard overnight of the return, and as he went to meet him now, he saw from Guy's untroubled countenance and the heartiness of his greeting that nothing of a painful nature had occurred as yet.

'Awfully glad to see you again, old fellow!' began Guy. 'You're looking rather seedy, though; you've been sticking to that beastly Lincoln's Inn too long.

Well, you mustn't be in a hurry to get back just yet awhile, that's all. Of course you've heard it's all right about Ida and me? . . . Thanks, I knew you'd be pleased about it. I do think I'm the luckiest beggar in the whole world—the mater's come round, got a letter in Paris asking Ida over to Hawleigh—that was old Aunt Julia! So we are going to be brothers-in-law after all—that reminds me, I've a note for you from Margot somewhere. Ah, here it is!' Orme hurriedly read the note, which contained only these words: 'I want to see you alone, at once; you will find me at the small gate.—MARGOT.'

He went back at once with Guy, who was overflowing with high spirits and eager to return to see Ida. 'I haven't seen her since last night,' he said, 'she's rather knocked up by the journey and didn't come down to breakfast—she's not strong, poor little girl, but she'll be down by this time, I daresay. Here we are at the gate, and there's Margot herself waiting for you—hope you're flattered! I'll go round the other way, eh?—"fellow-feeling" now, you know. Good-bye till lunch.'

Orme advanced to meet Margot alone. Her eyes looked very large and bright as she stood there, her lips were parted, one of her beautiful hands was pressed closely against her side, the other was dry and burning as he took it. She tried in vain to speak.

'You have sent for me, Margot,' he said; 'is it known yet?'

She shook her head. 'You said you would speak to

him yourself,' she faltered, with difficulty. 'Did you *mean* that, Nugent?'

His heart hardened against her. 'I did,' he answered; 'I intend to speak to-night, if I must. Don't try to persuade me against it—it will be no good, Margot.'

'I *want* you to speak,' she said, 'that is why I sent for you. I want you to go and tell him—*now*!'

When a man has strung himself to undergo a certain ordeal, any modification in the conditions which he has pictured to himself for it beforehand is apt to increase his reluctance. Orme had imagined the scene as taking place some hours later, with the dusk to serve as a screen between Chadwick and himself. To go through it in broad daylight, within the next few minutes, was more than he felt prepared for just then.

'Must it be now?' he said.

'At once,' she repeated impetuously; 'that girl is growing suspicious, she will wait no longer. If it must come, I—I would rather it came from you.'

'Is there no other way?' he cried. 'Margot—it sounds like empty extravagance, but it is true that I would rather die here this instant than be the means of bringing this upon you—tell me you believe that!'

She smiled sadly, a little bitterly. 'I do believe it,' she said; 'you are following what you consider your duty—what *is* your duty. I don't blame you. I even wish you to do it—only for God's sake, do it now; let

me know the worst at once. He is in his study, alone —go to him there!'

'Think first,' he urged her; 'cannot you find courage to tell him yourself? You know that I say this for your own sake, not mine. I will go with you, help you, protect you if that is necessary—but indeed it will be better for you to accuse yourself.'

She covered her face with her hands for a moment. 'I—I cannot,' she said; 'I have not strength enough for that. I will come with you. I meant to do that—if you will let me . . . you shall stand between him and me, but more than that—no, Nugent, you must not ask too much of me!'

'Come then,' he said, 'and God help us both, Margot!'

They passed through the cool fragrant hall; at the door of Chadwick's study she faltered for the first time, and he feared she was about to faint, but she thrust back his arm with a blind gesture of refusal, and they went in.

Chadwick was reading an Indian journal, which now formed his sole literature; a glass of brandy and soda stood at his elbow; the windows of the room were closed, and the air was heavy with recent cigar smoke. Margot sank down in a window-seat, looking out on the trim lawn and the ribbon-planted beds, over which yellow butterflies were gaily fluttering.

'Well, Orme,' said Chadwick, who did not seem to be in one of his dangerous moods just then, 'you haven't honoured us by looking in much lately. I don't know

if that's the way courting is done nowadays, but when *I* was a young man— However, if Miss Margot there don't object, it's not for me to say a word. Take a seat, man, it fidgets me to see you standing there like that. This paper here, "The Bengal Planter," says indigo's looking up again ; if that fool of an Allen had been out there now, he might be making lacs and lacs, doubling the value of the concern. Ah, well, the young scoundrel chose to throw away all his opportunities, and he's paying for his folly somewhere, I hope ! I've done with him long ago. I don't know why I should talk of him now—it isn't because he's anything to *me* any more ! '

'Mr. Chadwick,' began Nugent, 'Margot and I have come in to tell you something—something it is necessary that you should be told.'

'Phew ! ' exclaimed Chadwick, with a long whistle ; 'what, have you made up your minds to be married at once, then ? Well, you must settle that with my wife. *I'm* nobody here, you know ! ' Notwithstanding, he was clearly pleased at being consulted.

'Oh, no—no ! ' cried Margot from the window-seat. 'It is not that—oh, Nugent, make him understand ! '

'I see,' said Chadwick ; 'it's the other way, eh ? Fallen out, have you ? There again, it's no use coming to me about it—*I* can't make it up between you ! '

'Wait till you have heard what we have to tell—it is nothing of that kind. It is something very painful to say, and to hear, something which Margot has had on her mind for a long time and can bear no longer. I

am here to speak for her; you can see that she is in no condition to speak for herself.'

'Go on, sir,' said Chadwick, 'I'm listening to you, though I'm d—d if I know what's coming.'

'Her secret is connected with your son Allen. You sent him away from home under the belief that he had attempted a robbery. He was perfectly innocent of any idea of robbery. What he did was in consequence of instructions he had received.'

'Do you know what you're saying, sir? You're implying that I have been fool enough to believe my son a scoundrel, when—when he was nothing of the kind; at my age, and with my own son too! Why, if I believed that—but I see through it. I'm too old a hand to be taken in that way. It's a dodge of the pair of you to get me to forgive that boy. Now you listen to me: if you know where he is, you can tell him that if he likes to come to me and own up like a man, I may have something to say to him—but you'll never get round me by any d—d trumped-up cock-and-bull stories which a child wouldn't swallow; you tell him that! . . . Who is it now—Susan, eh? Well, get what you came for and go away; don't you see we're engaged, woman?'

'I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure, but if you're engaged in talking about Mr. Allen, you may find it to your advantage to hear what I've got to say first,' said Susan respectfully, as she stood just inside the study. 'I think you're more likely to hear the truth from me than from some parties that could be named.'

'Stop, sir!' said Nugent. 'Let this woman tell her

story afterwards, when you have heard us; you will find the two accounts agree.'

'Shall I? I'm not so sure of that!' returned Chadwick, with a muddled kind of cunning. 'If I did, it would only prove you were all of a tale and wouldn't alter my opinion. But I mean to put a few quiet questions to her before I go any farther. Now, you Susan, what have you been put up to say about Mr. Allen, eh? Out with it.'

'I haven't been put up to say nothing, sir; and there's two now standing in this room would have been glad enough to shut my mouth if I'd been willing, but willing I was not.'

'Don't, Nugent, don't!' said Margot disdainfully, as he was about to make some indignant protest; 'let her go on—what does it matter now?'

'It may be news to you, sir,' continued Susan, now secure of a hearing, 'that Mr. Allen was back here not many nights ago, in this very garden.'

'I thought as much!' said Chadwick; 'so that was how you came to hatch up this whitewashing story of yours?' he added, turning to Margot, who was powerless to reply.

'In course, sir,' said Susan, 'I don't know what Miss Margot may have told you, or what she hasn't. P'raps she told you how she sent him away, saying she couldn't do nothing to clear him, and it warn't not safe to go near you just then? P'raps she mentioned about his bringing out an old letter of hers telling him how he was to go to her room and take her locket, and

sell it, and send the money to her, and about her tearing up the letter, and daring him to do his worst?'

'I did not!' cried Margot. 'Nugent, you will not believe that? Ah, my God, you do, you do!'

'Considering that I picked up these very pieces a few minutes after,' said Susan, 'Mr. Nugent would be hard put to it *not* to believe it, though he did pretend to when I came to him and asked him to speak up for Mr. Allen. Yes, sir, I've had to act all by myself, for I knew as no one else wasn't likely to. Poor Mr. Allen, sir, has been made a scapegoat of by them as should have known better, and as wouldn't have spoke now—and how far they meant to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, that I leave to their own hearts and consciences to say—but not a word would ha' passed their lips, true *or* false, but for knowing I had evidence, and the will to use it. I don't expect no thanks, beyond seeing Mr. Allen given back his rightful place, and her as drove him out and kep' him out known for what she is; and here's the evidence, sir, which I leave it to you to judge whether I'm telling you lies or not!' And Susan brought out the fatal letter from under her apron, smoothed it carefully out, and placed it before Chadwick. 'It's got a little rubbed, sir,' she said apologetically, 'and the paste shows in places, but you can make out the writing all the same.'

Chadwick sat in a sort of stupor; the satisfaction he had felt with his own acuteness had vanished long since; his brain, drugged and bemused by constant excesses, was still grappling with these new and

scarcely conceivable ideas that had been so rudely presented to it.

'Very well,' he said at length, fixing his glowing eyes on the girl, 'you've told your story—now you can go, do you hear? Be quick about it!'

Unwilling as Susan was, she had to obey, and when she had closed the door, Chadwick, with hands that trembled from other causes than drink, took up the letter, and read it slowly, while Margot, as she sat there, felt as if her heart must burst if the intolerable strain were to be much longer continued.

At last he looked up, his face purple and congested with the anger he was striving to keep down sufficiently to remain articulate. 'So,' he said to Margot, 'I've been tricked into turning against my own boy, have I?—the only child I had of my own—and it was your doing! You who took advantage of his being a fool, and used him as your catspaw—or, as likely as not, sent him this precious letter as a trap to get him out of your way! You kept him quiet to the very end—you found ways of shutting his mouth; but that wasn't enough for you, you weren't contented till he was out of the house. You told me in this very room—God! I can hear you now—that it was "better that he should go." Better! ah, and you knew *why* it was better! And he and I went up to London together, and all the time I was with him, there was I treating him like a dog, and he never let on, never said a word to show me what I was doing. But he ran away—I don't wonder at it, poor devil! And when he came back,' Chadwick

continued, almost choking now with rage, 'when he came back, *that* did not please your ladyship, so you cheated, and lied, and fooled him into going off again to starve and rot in the gutter for all you cared! You thought when the letter was once torn up it would tell no tales, and you went on as calm and haughty as ever, lecturing me on my goings on, and ruling the house, as if you were its guardian angel, instead of what you are. Why, even the poor ignorant coolie girls out where I've been, if they could understand what you'd done, would spit in your face. And now, when the game's up, you come in, quite cool and collected, and tell me just as little as you safely can, and think that will end the matter! As for you, sir,' he added, turning round on Orme, 'I don't know what you think of yourself, but I know very well what *I* think of you: you've lent yourself to all this, you've done your best to hush up a——'

Here Margot rose and came forward unsteadily. 'Say what you choose to me,' she said, 'it is just . . . but you insult Nugent when you join him with me. He knew nothing till a few days ago. Ever since he did know, he has never left off urging me to tell you all, and I—I could not till now, when I was too late.'

'Too late! Yes, you are too late to better your own case. If I was wrong about Orme, I'm sorry; it's something to know you haven't succeeded in making a fool of *him*, at all events. Now mark what I say: I'll take good care that all your fine friends in the county shall hear what you are, and what you are not ashamed to

do; if they like to associate with you after that, they're a less particular set than I take them for. But I want to know more about it before I go any farther. If Orme hasn't been with you in this, who *has*? Who put it into your head to ruin that boy? Was your mother at the bottom of it? Answer me, for I'll find out somehow, and, if she was, I'll make her repent it, by Heaven I will!'

Margot threw out her hands in passionate protest. 'Mother!' she cried; 'why do you suspect her of being so wicked?—what has she done to be accused of this? She knew nothing, no more than you did; she knows nothing still. Oh, you *must* believe that, it is the simple truth. Must I tell you again and again that—that there is only one person you have the right to punish, and that person is I!'

As she ceased speaking, the library door opened once more and Guy appeared. 'Not interrupting you, I hope?' he said briskly; 'I thought Ida might be in here, perhaps?'

'No, Guy, no,' said Margot, 'she is not down yet, she is unwell, and—and we are engaged . . . please, *please* go away!'

'Here, Hotham, don't you go!' Chadwick called out, with a savage laugh, 'you've a right to know all about it, now you're one of the family; come in, and shut the door. I should be glad of your opinion.' Guy came in, his cheery face suddenly growing troubled.

'I don't know if you'll recollect a boy of mine that

used to be hanging about?' Chadwick resumed—'a rough ungentlemanly cub he was—*you* wouldn't notice him most likely?'

'I remember your son, sir, perfectly,' said Guy. 'He went out to India some time ago, didn't he? No bad news of him, I hope?'

'I sent him out to India because I found him out in what I believed was downright theft. I've just discovered that, as it happened, he was as honest as the day all the time; and there was some one else who knew it at the time, a woman too, and could have saved him by a word; but she had an axe of her own to grind, and she said nothing—she let him go. What should you think of a woman who could do a thing like that, now?'

'Think?' said Guy. 'What any man would think. It was one of the servants, then—the girl, I suppose, I saw coming out of this room just now?'

'That's you aristocrats all over!' said Chadwick. 'If a dirty action's done, of course it must be one of the lower classes who did it! Well-bred, handsome ladies and gentlemen couldn't possibly do anything shabby! But, however it may surprise you, it wasn't Susan or any low housemaid or servant at all. Ask Margot there to tell you who it was!'

Guy half turned to Margot, who suddenly hid her face. 'Good God!' he said in a low voice; 'is it possible?'

'Ah! it's strange, isn't it, but possible—just barely possible, as you see. Look at her, Hotham—that is

the young lady to whom you will be related some day, that is, if this doesn't alter your plans, as I expect it will when you've heard the whole story.'

Guy had never had a very hearty liking for Margot, whom he suspected, unjustly enough, of looking down upon him. But as he saw her there, bowed down under her shame and her step-father's coarse abuse, his chivalry was roused and he could feel only lenient.

'I don't know quite what Miss Chevening has done,' he said haughtily, 'or whether I should blame her if I heard the whole story; but, however bad it might be, it could not possibly affect me, as far as Ida is concerned. I shall marry Ida, and not her family.'

Margot caught his hand in eager gratitude. 'Guy!' she cried, 'I knew you would say that, but God bless you for saying so . . . God bless you for not turning against her, because of me! And indeed she would not deserve it, and it would break her heart, for she loves you very dearly, Guy!'

'There!' he said, feeling greatly embarrassed by the scene and anxious to escape from it, 'don't be afraid, Margot, I—I'm not that sort of fellow, and I daresay,' he added awkwardly, 'there's a mistake somewhere. I'd better leave you to clear it up, I think!' And he got out of the room with an evident desire to know no more.

'Clear it up?' said Chadwick, when he had gone. 'It shall be cleared up with a vengeance; it's something to find that even your beloved swells do draw the line somewhere. What are you made of, I wonder, to stand

there as straight and proud as ever, when you ought to be grovelling on the ground for shame, you stubborn false-faced she-devil——!'

Orme had been standing apart all this time, not daring to interfere lest he should excite Chadwick still further against his step-daughter. And in his heart he felt that this fury was justifiable, that Margot's insensibility to the full baseness of her conduct almost deserved this brutal awakening, but now he could stand no more.

'That will do, sir,' he said; 'you have said enough in all conscience. Margot, let me take you away; there is no reason why we should stay here any longer.'

She submitted to be led out of the room and into the hall, like a child. She sat for a moment on one of the couches there and closed her eyes.

'Nugent,' she said faintly, 'how you must despise me!'

Orme was very pale. Was it not true? Had he not indeed despised her?—and yet the hopelessness of her grief touched his heart so powerfully then that the love he had thought dead stirred, if faintly. He knelt by the couch, and took her hand.

'Margot!' he said, 'don't say such things—don't think them. I cannot leave you here. . . . I can't give you up—do what I will! Let me take care of you still, dear. . . . Give me the right to take you away out of all this!'

She put him gently aside as she rose. 'It was good of you to offer that,' she said, 'but—ah! Nugent, do

you think I cannot see that it was pity that made you say it? Don't protest—you know, and I know, that your love can never be what it once was. And anything less I could not bear—pity and forbearance least of all! No, it is over for both of us—it ended that night. Your standard is too high for me. . . . If I could alter your judgment of me in some respects, there would still be things you could never really pardon, that would make perfect confidence between us impossible always. I would rather be alone all my days than endure the knowledge that my husband could never honour nor trust me in his heart. See, Nugent, I set you free . . . it is my wish to be free myself . . . so we will say good-bye here for the last time of all, and you must try to think kindly of me, as I shall of you always!'

He saw that her decision was irrevocable—perhaps even felt the truth of her words; while something in her manner as much as her words told him that a change had taken place in her feelings towards him. Yet it was not relief that he felt then—only a bitter realisation, now that he had lost her, of all that she was, would ever be, to him. 'Is it really too late?' he said impetuously. 'Margot, take time to think, before deciding . . . surely we need one another too much to part!'

'I need no one any more,' she said. 'I have decided, Nugent. Good-bye.'

'Since it must be, then,' he answered; and there, at the foot of the staircase, they parted, calmly on both sides now that parting was seen to be inevitable.

Nugent went home to the Vicarage too exhausted and stunned by all he had gone through to be capable of any acute emotion. In a few words he told Millicent what had happened, and that afternoon, feeling that he could bear Gorsecombe no longer, he went up to London.

CHAPTER IX

MARGOT GOES TO MAKE AMENDS

CHADWICK had not attempted to prevent or follow Margot's retreat. As if he felt a rebuke in Orme's remonstrance, he looked on in silence as the two quitted the room. He regretted his burst of passion; even now, he could not storm at his step-daughter without that instant sense of inferiority. Abuse, after all, was a poor revenge—he must find more ingenious methods than that; now he had the whip hand over this disdainful girl, the lash must be applied with all the science at his command.

His first idea had been to turn her out of the house, as she had caused Allen to be turned out, but this again was unsatisfactory. He wanted her at hand, to assure himself of her disgrace, to be able to turn the weapon in the wound from time to time, to watch her sinking slowly under the burden of her expiation.

Chadwick was no fool, and if drink had dulled his brain in some respects, it heightened and inflamed its capacity for working mischief. 'By God, I've got it!' he cried, after reflecting for some minutes, and then he rang the bell. 'Tell your mistress I want to see her,' he said; he was quite calm now.

Mrs. Chadwick appeared, still in total ignorance of what had occurred, and her husband, in a few terse bitter sentences, put her in possession of the whole story of her daughter's duplicity and cowardice. The poor woman was at first utterly incredulous, but at length, when unable to resist longer, she began to protest her own innocence and feebly lament her child's misconduct. 'If I had guessed what was going on,' she declared, 'I should never, never have permitted it! Even as it was, I felt it was a pity poor Allen should have to go, though I did not like to question your judgment. But Margot always has taken her own way from a child; she never treated me as a mother. I was not told a word—not a single word! You see, Joshua, I don't take her part now—I am ashamed that a daughter of mine should have acted so—so disgracefully. I could disown her, I am so deeply annoyed. Joshua, you believe me, don't you? You don't—you don't connect *me* with this?'

'No,' said Chadwick, 'don't you be alarmed, Selina, I don't suspect you. Margot wouldn't be as clever as I take her to be if she'd chosen you for a confederate. The question now is—what's to be done with her? and I've been thinking it over, and I've come to a conclusion which I think will meet the case. So if you'll go and find her and bring her in to me—she'd better come, tell her—I can settle what her punishment is to be.'

After a short delay, his wife returned with Margot. 'I've brought this wicked girl to hear your decision;

she is resigned to any punishment you think proper to inflict—all I *do* ask, Joshua, is that you will not expose her publicly.'

'Well,' he replied, 'as she's so sensitive when it's her own character that's concerned, I suppose I must make allowances for her. If I did what was just, I should send her away and let the whole county know why. But I want my boy Allen back. I don't believe he'd have let himself be treated as he was if he hadn't had a soft place in his heart as well as his head, and it's likely enough he won't come back at all if he knows his dear loving tender-hearted step-sister isn't to be here. The first thing to be done is to find that boy, and that I'll do; it's only a question of a little money—he'll be back in a few days from now. And then—and then, young lady,' he continued, with a gleam of malignity in his blood-tinged eyes, 'we shall have an opportunity of testing your penitence. Your old lover has cast you off—I could see that well enough just now. If my boy is willing, after the way you've treated him, to marry you, marry him you shall, or take the consequences!'

Suddenly as this *bizarre* idea had been conceived, he became more and more enamoured of it. He knew Margot's aversion to Allen would render such a bond between them the most exquisite conceivable punishment to her; in his coarse materiality he considered the mere possession of such a wife should satisfy Allen. It was nothing to him that neither her character nor her tastes made it probable that such a union would be

a happy one. Allen must manage her, break her proud spirit; if he did not know how to do that with the advantages he would have, he would be a fool indeed, and, in any case, the young fellow would have a wife whom many would envy him.

'Margot,' cried her mother, desperately anxious to smooth things over, 'you hear what your father is—is so generous as to propose? It is really more—much more than you deserve. Tell your father that you are willing to be Allen's wife, if he desires it . . . it is the very least you can do—now!'

Margot glanced wildly round; the horror of this unlooked-for announcement almost deprived her of power to think. She felt abandoned in this extremity. Nugent was no longer at her side—she herself had sent him away, and her mother seemed to see nothing hideous and unnatural in this proposition. Must she yield? Ah! no, anything sooner than that; and all at once her face became calm and resolved—she had decided what to do.

'I—I want time to consider,' she said, very low; 'let me have till this evening?'

'Don't be too long about it, then—or *I* may consider too. This evening you'll be good enough to come and inform me what you are pleased to decide.'

'You will know before that,' she replied, 'whether from me or not.' And slowly, like one walking in sleep, she glided out of the room.

Chadwick spent the afternoon in drawing up advertisements intended to catch Allen's eye, and writing

letter after letter to detectives and private inquiry agents, dashing them off in feverish haste, and then destroying them as unsatisfactory for various reasons.

'Pah!' he said, after composing one of these documents for the twentieth time. 'Why do I worry myself like this, when the chances are I can find out where he is at once? It's a thousand to one that girl Margot knows! Why the devil didn't I think of that before? I've lost a whole afternoon over this! I believe I'm going off my head with the excitement of it all. I'll go and get this out of Margot now—or, stay, I'll send Selina.'

His wife, after departing to obtain this information, came back into the study with a troubled expression.

'Well,' inquired Chadwick, 'where does she say he is?'

'I think she must be asleep, Joshua. I knocked several times, but I could not make her hear or get any answer. It is better not to disturb her just yet, perhaps.'

'I'll give her another hour,' he said, 'not a minute more.'

Towards evening he could wait no longer. 'She'll listen when *I* knock,' he said; 'I'll have no more of this d—d sulking. I'm going myself.'

His wife followed him upstairs and along the corridor to Margot's room; the children, vaguely conscious of some disturbance in the air, left their tea in the schoolroom and crept up, too, at a distance. Guy himself, who had been hanging about all day in moody

indecision, uncertain whether he ought not to leave the house, and yet unwilling to do so without having seen Ida once more, followed too.

Mrs. Chadwick knocked first, or rather tapped softly. 'Margot, dearest, it is I—mother; you will let mother in! I want to speak to you!' But there was no answer.

'Joshua,' she faltered, 'I—I don't like this . . . if I could only see into the room, but it's all dark . . . she—she may have fainted!'

'I'll soon bring her out of that!' answered Chadwick brutally. 'Margot—do you hear me?' he shouted; 'I've had enough of this folly—open the door, I say!'

And he hammered and thundered on the panels with his heavy fists, while Lettice and Reggie began to cry.

'Stop that, will you!' cried their step-father savagely, 'how can I hear your sister speak in this din? There's nothing to cry about.' And again he thundered at the door, and again there was only silence within.

Another person had joined the group in the corridor; it was Ida, who, pale and dishevelled, with a loose wrapper thrown over her, had stolen out of her room.

'Guy,' she said, 'oh, never mind me, I am better—quite well. What is it, Guy? Who is this they are trying to awake . . . not—not *Margot*?'

'I—I think it is,' said Guy, trying to speak cheerily; 'it's nothing, Ida; go back to your room, or you'll be ill again.'

But Ida refused to move ; she stood there, watching her stepfather with a fascinated horror in her eyes.

'Margot,' said Chadwick, his voice thick with passion, 'if you don't open this door directly—by heaven I'll break it in!'

Then Ida rushed forward with a cry. 'Don't speak to her like that!' she cried, 'you will be sorry! . . . Can't you understand? She cannot hear you any more —she will *never* open . . . she is lying there, dead! I am sure of it. Oh, Margot, Margot!'

'Don't talk such cursed nonsense!' said Chadwick hoarsely, though he had turned ghastly pale; 'she's shamming, or sulking. I'll soon see which.'

In another minute he fetched one of the fire-irons from the opposite room. 'Stand away!' he said, and after a few violent blows the panel fell out shattered, but the *portière* before the door inside still hid the interior of the room, and no one had courage for a moment to withdraw it.

The door, which was locked, and from which the key had apparently fallen, as it was not in the keyhole, had been shaken by the blows and soon yielded. Then Chadwick flung it back and went in, while the others held their breath in awful expectation.

He glanced round the dainty room, first in evident fear, then with a reaction of relief and anger combined.

'She's made fools of us all!' he said; 'there's not a sign of her here—she's got away!'

Ida, who had been cowering back in a corner with hidden eyes and a face the colour of chalk, burst into a

wild laugh at this. 'She's got away! you can't catch her, you can't hurt her now!' she cried; and violent hysterics followed which made it necessary to carry her back into her own room.

. . . . . .

Margot had escaped, and her flight had been easily and simply accomplished. She had collected all her few valuables, and, waiting till the hour when the servants were all at dinner, had gone out, drawing the *portière*, locking the door behind her, and carrying away the key. Then stealing down by the back staircase, she had gained the stables, where Yarrow came out of his kennel with a rattle of his chain and a long affectionate whine —there was no one else to see her—and not daring to stop, she passed on and gained a by-road that by a somewhat circuitous route would, she knew, bring her out by the village of Puddock's End, through which the rail passed, for she feared to be recognised by some of the Gorsecombe officials, if she went to the station there.

And so an hour and a half later, tired and dusty, she stood on the platform at Puddock's End, waiting for the train which, as she had calculated, she was just in time to catch. There were very few there, and if some of them remembered her as the young lady they had seen driving or riding about Gorsecombe, it was only to wonder at the eccentricity of gentlefolk in taking a long walk in the heat and dust when they had other means of locomotion, for there is no one more puzzled by voluntary pedestrianism than the average peasant.

The London train came up, and, as the carriages rolled by, Margot saw with a spasm of the heart Nugent's face at one of the windows. He did not see her, and she had only a momentary glimpse of his profile, but that showed her a set and stricken face, which had grown older and sterner since the day, only a week ago, when they had ridden together.

She got into an empty compartment as far away as she could, and when the train moved off, set herself, as she gazed with eyes that saw nothing on the flitting landscape, to think out her future course.

She had fled, never to return; no force, no persuasion should make her marry Allen. The idea revived her dislike and repulsion almost as strongly as if he had won no claims to her gratitude. His claims?—ah! how she hated them; how she writhed under the sense of them; how, in the hard bitterness of her soul just then, she hated him that he had shown himself the worthier! Yet, though she was fleeing from him, she was on her way to him. That was the first object for which she had escaped: she owed him amends, and she would pay him by bringing the news of his restoration in person. He had made a great sacrifice for her; well, she would thank him, and release him from effacing himself any longer: what more was she bound to do? Was it nothing that she should seek him out in his misery, humble herself before him—she who had once held her head so high? If he chose to claim her, to make a merit of what he had done—why, that would prove him despicable indeed, and she would have the

right to despise him once more. His sacrifice!—was *she* giving up nothing? He had borne hardships and disgrace for not two years, he would regain far more now than he had ever lost; but she—she had lost lover, home, friends—all that had made her life; and none of this would have been had Allen never existed, or had he even acted with common sense! No, she could not be grateful, she would not pretend that she was—he could not make her a debtor against her will! She would acknowledge her obligation as fully and freely as he could desire—indeed, she must not let him perceive that it was less than he imagined—but when she had done that, and proved to him that his father's house was open to him once more, she would have done all that anyone could expect her to do, and her debt would be discharged.

She found herself nearing London with a shivering repugnance; the first straggling rows of raw terraces amongst the fields and hedges made her heart sink, she grudged each telegraph pole as it flashed by.

From time to time she had been haunted during the journey by the irony of Nugent travelling in the same train, the necessity of evading him at the terminus, and when they arrived she kept her seat as long as possible, until, in fact, a porter gave her the superfluous information that 'they didn't go no further,' after which she was ashamed to stay in the carriage.

Having no luggage to detain her, she was able to drive away at once, and told her cabman to take her to the address scrawled by Allen on the scrap of paper which she still preserved. As her hansom passed out

of the station, she had one last glimpse of Nugent's tall figure in the group before the luggage-van—he was too much engaged in identifying his portmanteaus to look round. 'Even now,' she thought, 'he is not too heart-broken to think about his hat-box!' and then she smiled, though bitterly, at her own unreasonableness.

It was a long drive across London to Clerkenwell; the streets seemed close and fetid after the pure country air; she was morbidly alive to the ugliness and squalor through which much of their road lay. And yet it was not all ugly—could not be on that lovely August evening, with the dingy brick fronts of the houses giving out a warm apricot glow, and towers and steeples shining like enchanted palaces in sunset glories of rose and gold, while, towards the East, a few flamingo-tinted clouds sailed, like lazy dragons, through the blue-green sky. And in the humbler and quieter streets there was a pleasant air of relaxation, small shopkeepers gazing placidly from their doors, women chatting at street-corners, children dancing on the pavement to a friendly piano-organ—much, even in busy, toiling, ugly London, to see and feel the better for.

But Margot had no eyes for it; as she drove on, her imagination was busy dramatising the scene that was coming. Should she find Allen in his lodgings, would he be in a state to understand her?—reckless, obstinate, how should she make it clear to him that her own return was hopeless, that to delay his for another day would be boyish folly? If he were to insist on remaining where she was, how should she escape? She

felt that she might be encountering difficulties, even dangers, but she relied on her own courage and address to carry her through—she could not rest until she had accomplished this act of penance.

The cab stopped before a house which, if respectable, was poor and mean-looking enough. Margot, as she alighted, felt its squalor—but rather on her own account than on Allen's. The woman who let the rooms came to the door, a typical London landlady of the lower class—dirty, untidy, cringing, yet suspicious.

She was plainly surprised at this stately young lady's inquiry for any lodger of hers, particularly as Margot's appearance did not suggest the 'Bible-woman.'

'I am a friend of Mr. Chadwick's,' said Margot. When it came to the point, she could not bring herself to mention their relationship.

'If you're a friend, miss,' said the woman, 'in course that's another thing, but I didn't know as Mr. Chadwick had friends among the quality, nor yet no friends belonging to him anywheres, which he never give me to understand so himself.'

'Is he at home now? Can I see him?' asked Margot curtly.

The woman wiped her hands on her apron. 'Well, no, miss,' she said apologetically; 'it so 'appens that you can't see him, not at this partickler time. I'm sure I 'ope you won't blame me for hacting as I did, seeing as I'm a poor woman with my living to get, and no one to look to for any expenses I might be put to, and thinking it best he should go, on all accounts.'

'If you mean you have turned him out of your house,' said Margot, 'you have done a thing you will be sorry for for your own sake!'

'It's well for you to talk, miss, but he's better off at the orspital than what he'd ha' been if I'd kep' him where he was.'

'The hospital!' exclaimed Margot, with a strange contraction of the heart, 'has he had an accident? Where is he?'

'At Sin Bartholomew's Orspital, miss. You see, he was away for a day and night about a week ago, and he come home sopping wet the follering afternoon, and looking that bad, I see he'd taken a chill, and I arst him to lay up a bit, but he didn't seem to care what he did, and he wouldn't take no advice nor nothing, and the next day he couldn't get up to his work, and I knew he'd be laid up for some time. And seeing as I couldn't nurse him here, having no conveniences for sickness in my 'ouse, why, I 'ad him took to the orspital, miss, where he'd 'ave all he required.'

'You did quite right,' said Margot hurriedly. 'Tell me, where is this place? Will they let me see him there if I go?'

'Bless you, yes, miss, if it's the proper time. I know when my poor son fell off of a van and was laying there, they let me go in and see him every day. And if you want to go there now, there's my little boy 'ere as will go with you and show the way. Jimmy, put on your 'at and go with the lady to the orspital—*you* know.'

So Jimmy acted as Margot's escort. 'Do you know,' she asked him, as he padded along at her side, 'if Mr. Chadwick is really ill or not?'

'He didn't look very bad, miss, he 'ad quite a colour when they come for him with the stretcher. I 'ope as nothink won't 'appen to him, miss. He treated me and Polly—that's my sister, Polly is—very kind allus. Day he went orf, he give us sixpence atween us two, and told us he should come back either very 'appy or very miserable, he didn't know which, and we was to wish him luck. And we did, miss, but he ain't 'ad much on it yet. This here's Bartholomew's gate, miss; the porter 'll tell you if you can see him.'

'Thank you, Jimmy,' said Margot; 'and—and I want you to take this, if you will, and give half to Polly.'

'Why, it's arf-a-dollar, miss!' cried the boy. 'Did you *mean* it?'

'It's because you were kind to Mr. Chadwick,' said Margot, wishing he were clean enough to kiss. Her eyes were stung with tears as she passed under the double archway. 'Those poor children were kind,' she was thinking, 'why could not *I* be kinder?—why? why?'

The porter told her the name of the ward in which Allen was, and if she went up, she was told, she might be permitted to see him. The quadrangle within looked cool and quiet with its fine trees, under which one or two medical students were strolling bareheaded in the dusk. She found the right door and went up

the broad stairs, clinging to the old oak balusters; at the several landing-stages there were the great doors of the wards, from which came a faint odour of anæsthetics and the hushed wailing of infants, and at the top of all was the ward she sought; she stopped for a moment on the threshold, dreading to enter, and then, overcoming her terror, she went in.

There was nothing repulsive, nothing grim or obtrusively painful in the scene that met her eyes. The long ward had a cheerful look, with the bright pictures on the walls, the flowers and bird-cages in the windows, the touches of colour from the pink counterpanes and blue checked curtains, the general impression of air and light. She felt reassured: it seemed a place to get well in—not to die in.

As she stood there, one of the nurses, a girl of about her own age, came up in her pretty striped hospital dress, and, on hearing her object, told her the number of Allen's bed.

'I will take you to him,' she said; 'may I ask if you are a friend of his?'

'I am his sister.'

'I am afraid he will not know you; he has been delirious most of the day,' she said.

'Is he—is he dangerously ill?' asked Margot, with renewed alarm.

'The doctor does not give much hope,' said the nurse, with a gentle matter-of-factness, 'but there is still a chance that he will get over it. It is inflammation of the lungs.'

Margot passed up between the rows of beds to the end of the room, and there, with his hands spread out on the coverlet, a bright flush on his face, Allen was lying; his eyes were bright, and she thought, as she took the revolving seat by his bedside and spoke his name softly, that he knew her.

But he went on muttering—at first incoherent sentences, and then, as though her presence affected him to some degree, more lucidly.

'Tell her I didn't cheat in the Casino,' he was saying, evidently imagining himself back at Trouville; 'she thinks I did—that's why she has gone away—and I shall never see her again, never!'

Then the scene shifted. 'Didn't you know, Margot? You're going to live with *us* now—all of you, always! . . . I shall see her every day—every day! We are bound to be friends now, aren't we? But I wish she looked more pleased over it. I didn't think she'd mind it so much as that! She'll get used to it in time; we'll be like one family together in no time—don't you think so? People do—living in the same house and that, and it isn't as if I was a stranger to her, either, is it? And I'm sure I'll try my best to make her feel at home and happy. . . . She is feeling strange at first, but she'll come round right enough. . . . I wish she'd take more notice of me. I do all I can to please her, but she never notices. When she sees me start out hunting on Hussar—but isn't Hussar dead? And—and I remember now . . . that's why she laughed at me; that's why they'll none of 'em speak to me now! . . . I didn't

think *you*'d turn against me, Lettie, but it don't signify. You're my friend, Bob, don't *you* think I'm treated rather bad? Ah, you don't know her, or you wouldn't say she does it to draw me on! . . . I tell you she's not the girl a fellow could act bold with, she—she makes you feel small somehow . . . and—yet, there she is—opposite. I never saw her look like that before—she's sorry about something. . . . Ah, what a fool I was—what a fool! I couldn't help it. Why did she half shut her eyes in that way? Now she hates me! If I could only make her own that I could act like a gentleman! If there was only something I could do for her, to make her friends with me again! . . . She *is* friends or why does she write?—tell me that. . . . I don't care—they may call me a thief if they like—it's only for a little while, only for a little while! When she comes back it will be all right. . . . But she *is* back and—she doesn't say anything! I can't get to see her alone, she's always in Ida's room. Why does she never mention that letter?—she never does. I won't be the first. I'll show her I can be gentleman. I won't allude to it till *she* does. . . . Ah, but I must—I must . . . they're going to send me to India—away from her, and still she won't say anything! There she sits—so pretty, and scornful, and silent, and knowing all the time! If you keep a lady's secrets and bear the blame of what she's done, you mustn't go and remind her of it—that isn't manners! It's not as if she didn't know! Susan shan't get anything out of me. I'll go to India, if that will please her. . . . There—she *is* sorry for me;

grateful, too, only she doesn't like to say so ; she doesn't want anyone to know yet. She trusts me—I'll show her I'm to be trusted. I'd sooner die than split on her now she's kind again. . . . She is singing "Abide with me" . . . no—no, it's not Margot, not Margot—only one of the passengers in the saloon . . . it—it sounded so like. . . . I thought I was back there outside the church in the dark, at Lingford. I forgot I was on board ship—going to India. That's how it was, Mr. Denham—it was hearing the tune.'

And here his mind began to ramble back to the Indian gold fields ; he was watching the digging, or the crushing, card-playing in the miners' bungalows, but always on the verge of becoming immensely rich. 'It's there—they all say it's there!' he would repeat again and again, 'veins of it—lodes of it! They've struck the dip—at last! The shares are going up already . . . Margot, I shall see you again very soon now . . . you won't despise me when I come back rich . . . I—I knew what I was doing, you see—better than indigo-planting, with everyone thinking me a thief!'

She had to sit there and hear it all : her attempts to soothe him were unheeded ; she could only wait, hoping to catch the first sign of returning intelligence to which she could appeal for forgiveness, and still he wandered, and every word she heard came as a fresh stab. The pride in which she had wrapped herself so stubbornly fell from her there—at last she saw herself as she was, with no sophistries, no self-delusions to shelter her from her own contempt.

Was it she indeed who had persistently scorned, misjudged, and ill-treated this poor boy, who had borne all this for love of her? She, who—not an hour ago—had been framing little speeches of haughtily conventional gratitude, questioning his claims even to such meagre acknowledgment as that? And now—when no atonement seemed too much to be made—his ears were closed to her remorse, his lips could not frame the forgiveness without which she would know no peace!

CHAPTER X

BEYOND HER POWER

> Child, if it were thine error or thy crime
> I care no longer, being all unblest.
> Wed whom thou wilt—but I am sick of Time
> And I desire to rest.
> Pass on, weak heart, and leave me where I lie,
> Go by, Go by.
>
> *Tennyson.*

THE dusk slowly deepened till the green summits of the trees in the courtyard were no longer visible in the blue-grey outside the windows. It was the hour when even exceptional visitors were expected to leave, and as Margot heard the hushed good-byes or forced-cheerful leave-takings that were taking place around her, she remembered for the first time that, when she too went, she would have no place to go to. The house physician was just going his round, and remained for some time by Allen's bedside; when he had finished his examination and given some directions to the nurse, Margot, who had been requested to withdraw during these proceedings, returned and spoke to him. 'Will you tell me,' she said imploringly, 'how long he will be like this—when he will know me?'

'I am afraid I cannot say that.'

'And must I go away now, leaving him like—like this?'

'Ah,' said the Doctor, 'you would wish to remain here for the night, then?'

'Oh, if I might!' said Margot eagerly.

'I will go and speak to "Sister" about it and see if it can be arranged,' he replied. 'Ah, I must wait, I see—' he added, with an accent that hardly denoted pleasure at the interruption—'they are going to have prayers.'

The Ward Sister had taken her stand at the other end of the room, opposite a reading-desk on which a single candle lit up her clear-cut face amidst the surrounding obscurity, and presently in a soft gentle voice she began to read some of the prayers and collects from the evening service, ending with the Lord's Prayer, which was repeated after her by most of the patients who were in a condition to attend. There was something striking and impressive in the whole scene, a strangely touching effect in those humble childlike responses from men many of whom must have felt themselves very near the solution of the great mystery.

When the simple function was over the Sister came forward to make arrangements for Margot's comfort during the night. A couch was brought and placed near Allen's bed.

For some hours she sat there, and during the earlier part of the time his talk ran on, and most of it was intelligible, while what she heard was, if possible, even more painful than before.

He fancied himself in the garden with her, but all recollection of what had happened there was lost. 'Margot!' he kept repeating, 'do you *mean* it? Will you really marry me?—*me*! . . . All the time I was away, I hoped you would say something—but not this . . . I thought you couldn't care for a poor good-for-nothing chap like me—not in that way. But you do—you do! . . . You shan't have to be ashamed of me like you used to, dear, about my not riding, and that. I'm not afraid of a horse now. I learnt to stick on—out there . . . we will have such rides together, Margot! I saw you and Lettie to-day, and I thought, "Will they ever let me ride with them?" And now you will! . . . Tear up the letter, Lettie, it isn't wanted any longer. Margot is going to tell them how it was . . . The governor shan't say anything to you, Margot, how could he if you look at him like that? To think of living at home after all—with you, and Lettie, and old Yarrow, and everybody!'

He gave a long sigh of delight, and then his murmurings became more and more indistinct and presently died away altogether in peaceful sleep; the flush had faded from his face, and he lay there with a smile of exhausted content.

Margot, as she looked at him sleeping there, felt some wonder at her old repulsion: was it that suffering and illness had done something to refine his face? All she knew was that—homely and unhandsome as it might be—she found no meanness or insignificance in it now.

When would he awake? She sat on in the lowered light; from one or two of the neighbouring beds came moans of pain or impatience at intervals. An old Jew in an opposite bed, who was dying of some internal disease, kept up a dismal croon of 'Ah, la, la! bi-bi-bi!' for hours, to cheat the gnawing pain, only stopping to curse a parrot when it woke and croaked drowsily. The nurses came round from time to time, taking temperatures and administering medicines, often to meet with peevish ingratitude from the sufferers.

One of the night nurses came to Margot and persuaded her to lie down, since she could do nothing for Allen now. 'I will call you if there is a change,' she said; and Margot lay down on the couch, though it was some time before she closed her eyes.

While she had been sitting by Allen's bed she had seen her duty in a new light: she had formed the resolve which, a few hours ago, no power on earth could have wrung from her—she had decided that she must marry Allen.

Not that she had come to love him—that would never be; even now, in the very height of her pity, she foresaw that she would have a reaction to contend with, that when Allen got well—as he would now, since he was sleeping so quietly and the nurse had spoken of a change—when Allen got well, the real ordeal would begin.

But she had done with love—she would find her happiness now in doing her duty, in trying to give her poor despised lover some return for all she had cost

him, since she was still desirable in his eyes. When he awoke he would be able to understand, and she would tell him that she was there, and that he must hasten to get well and be happy.

Then she too slept, and in her sleep there came a terrible dream. She was Allen's wife, and he had reverted to his worst; she saw him, more degraded, more contemptible, than in the old days. And now they were quarrelling—one of those intense and vivid scenes which Nature in repose presents with such terrific dramatic force and realism. It was in the library at Agra House, and she was remonstrating with him as he sat there, huddled up, blinking evilly at her with bemused red eyes—she was appealing to his love for her. And then he turned on her, and his eyes had the same mocking light in them she knew so well in his father's, and he told her that he had never loved her, always hated her—that he had married her, partly out of revenge, partly out of pity! And, as she heard, she saw Nugent Orme standing in the doorway, and woke with a cry.

The birds were chirping in the coming dawn: the foliage, the lines of roof and cornice, were all sharply revealed in the raw bluish light of early day.

She remembered her dream with a shudder. Thank God, it was a dream! And yet if it were to come true?—if it were sent as a warning? She lay trembling there, the resolution with which she had fallen asleep ebbing away as the daylight broadened; no—she could *not* marry Allen: she would be a tender loving sister to him,

she would go back to her home, if they would have her there, she would bear any humiliation her step-father chose to visit upon her; but marry Allen—ah, that could not be exacted from her!

She heard a sound behind her and saw the nurse standing by her couch.

'Has the change come?' she cried, and, starting up, she saw that a screen had been placed round Allen's bed.

'It came in the night,' the nurse said softly, taking Margot's hand, 'before we could call you. . . . My dear, my dear, don't cry so—the end came quite peacefully; he died in his sleep!'

He had died in his sleep; the last impressions on his disturbed brain had been happier ones than any she could have given—why should she wish it otherwise for him? But oh! the bitter remorse of feeling that she had not remained steadfast even in that tardy atonement of hers—that he was dead and never knew that she was there seeking his forgiveness! He had fallen, defeated in the great struggle; she lived and was free—but the victory was not with her.

CHAPTER XI

A HOUSE OF MOURNING

MARGOT'S escape, which, besides baulking her step-father's schemes of vengeance, deprived him of his best chance of discovering Allen's whereabouts, rekindled Chadwick's fury to a pitch that deprived him of all mastery of himself. He accused his wife of being a party to her flight, and vowed that unless the fugitive returned he would break up his household and leave his family with the barest means of subsistence.

Mrs. Chadwick sought to pacify him in vain; drink and excitement combined had made him almost insane. He terrified her by his threats of violence, which there was plainly a real danger of his carrying out. The poor woman was obliged to beg Guy Hotham not to leave the house at present, much as she would have preferred to conceal the family scandal if possible, and he consented out of anxiety for Ida.

By the next morning, however, Chadwick had quieted down, or rather his excitement had passed into another phase. Margot was forgotten for the time; his mind was full of plans for celebrating Allen's return. He talked of a grand dinner, of flags and illuminations,

of rejoicings in which the whole village should join; his distempered fancy ran wild on these grotesque and fantastic ideas, amongst which that of forcing his unwilling family to assist in their own humiliation was foremost.

He was enlarging on these schemes, and making his preparations for going up to London at once to begin the search, when a telegram was brought in. 'It's about the boy,' he said, and then, as he glanced through it, his face turned livid. 'Look at that!' he said to his wife. The telegram contained these words: '*Allen is here very ill. Come at once. You will find me here. Be prepared for the worst. Margot, Bartholomew's Hospital.*'

'I shall find her there!' he repeated with a sinister emphasis. 'If I find her, and not him, I know what I shall do. Yes, I know what I shall do!'

As Guy sat in the morning-room trying to read, Mrs. Chadwick burst in, pale with fear. 'Guy, dear Guy!' she gasped, 'a telegram has come from Margot. Allen is dying in a hospital, and she is with him. My husband is going up there at once. Oh, I am afraid! I am afraid! I saw him take out a revolver. If—if he finds Allen is dead, he is capable of anything. For God's sake, go with him; you can telegraph to her at the station; tell her she must not stay. I think he is mad. Oh, make haste and go with him, he is just starting . . . You will do this for us, we are so helpless!'

Guy sprang up, glad of any kind of action just then.

'Of course,' he said cheerfully, 'I'll go. I'll keep him from getting near her, never fear—he shan't touch Margot. Don't tell Ida where I've gone, she might be nervous.'

Chadwick was standing in the hall as he came out. 'Will you give me a lift as far as the station, sir?' Guy said, as nonchalantly as he could. Chadwick did not hear him, he was preparing to get in.

'Better let me take the reins, sir,' said Topham, from the horse's head. 'I've had to put 'Arebell in the trap, the other osses not being fit to go out, and the mare's fresh and she'll take some driving.'

'Do you think I can't drive?' cried Chadwick with an oath. 'I'll give her driving enough. Here, get up behind and hold your fool's tongue.'

Guy saw that if permission was asked, it would be refused, and so, as soon as Chadwick took the reins, he sprang up behind the dog-cart. Topham gave the mare her head, and his master started her with a cut which sent them down the drive at a gallop, leaving Topham himself far in the rear.

He came back to the porch. 'Master won't stop to take me up now, ma'am,' he said. 'He didn't ought to ha' drove, and that's the truth. Is Mr. Hotham going to bring the trap back, or what?'

'No, no,' said Mrs. Chadwick; 'go down to the station, and as fast as you can; you will be wanted to take the dog-cart home.'

Topham went off grumbling. 'To the station?' he muttered to himself; 'they're lucky if they get there!

I know I wish I'd put the cob in, lame as he is. 'Arebell ain't used to such work, she ain't.'

That morning, as Millicent Orme stood at her window in the Vicarage, looking out over the sweet-briar hedge upon the broad street, she heard shouts in the distance, and the sounds of wildly galloping hoofs; some of the shopkeepers rushed to their doors, the village constable stood in the middle of the road with outstretched arms, and then, thinking better of it, stepped back, and she saw Chadwick's dog-cart dash by at headlong speed, veering and yawing from side to side. The driver had evidently lost all control of his animal, and as they flashed by, a young man on the back seat was clambering across in a desperate effort to seize the reins and stop the maddened horse. The clatter died away, and a crowd set off running in the direction the vehicle had taken, while other villagers, more stolid, stood at their doorways discussing its probable fate.

A few minutes later, a man came running back, to be instantly surrounded; he went to the doctor's house opposite, and presently the doctor appeared, and both hurried down towards the station. Millicent ran down into the garden and out into the road, where she fell in with a stream of villagers. 'What has happened—can you tell me?' she asked of them. 'Is anyone hurt?'

'Don't rightly know as yet, miss,' said the saddler; 'but it's like to be a pretty bad haccident, I see that as they come by,' he said, with pride in his own discernment. 'That there Chadwick didn't seem to know or

care as the oss was a runnin' away with 'em. And young Muster Otham with him, too! Lor dear, if anythink has 'appened along of he, there'll be fine trouble up at 'Awleigh—there'll be that, and him the hair an' all! Ah, here be Muster Topham— Were you tipped off, Muster Topham, or how was it?'

'I'd give a thousan' pounds if this hadn't happened,' said Topham hoarsely, and panting after his run. 'If master had give me the reins, as I wanted him to it, there'd ha' been none o' this 'ere work.'

'Here they come!' said a labourer; 'ah, and they've been 'urt sure 'nough; they be carryin' one of 'em on a geatt. And the tother one—yes, he'll be 'urt bad, too, they're liftin' of 'un along in a 'orse-rug. Ah, dear me, such things ain't been seen in Gorsecombe since I've lived 'ere. Stand back, miss, do'ee now,' he added suddenly; 'it ain't no sight for such as ye.'

Millicent had already drawn back, with an instinctive dread. It was a dead man that was being borne past her now, with a hushed crowd following at a respectful distance.

Joshua Chadwick's violence had been stilled for ever. He lay there in dreadful inertness: some person had thrown a handkerchief over his face, and Millicent caught her breath in an agony lest it should fall, and yet was powerless to turn away her eyes.

After him came four men bearing Guy Hotham, who seemed dead, too, though, as a matter of fact, he still breathed; the doctor walked by his side, and the grim little procession was brought up by Topham leading the

trembling wild-eyed mare, with the broken shafts dangling from her collar. 'She'll never be fit for no more work!' he was saying to sympathising companions; 'such a kind little oss as she was too! If she'd been druv proper, she'd never ha' come to this end. God forgive me, but when I see a oss treated so, I think a broken neck's no more than his deserts—a madman he was if ever *I* see one!'

Later, Millicent heard the details from one of the eye-witnesses. The dog-cart had overturned at a corner, Chadwick being instantly killed, and Guy Hotham, who had been thrown upon a heap of stones, taken up insensible; the doctors pronounced it a severe case of concussion of the brain, and considered his recovery almost hopeless. Lady Adela and her daughter Joceline came over in haste from Hawleigh Court, but they had to be content to nurse him at Agra House, as it was impossible to move him.

The accident furnished the staple of village conversation; in the grocers' shops or the alehouse parlour, the persons who had been fortunate enough to see it happen enjoyed a brilliant social success. The village hairdresser, who was also a literary character, being accredited local reporter to the 'Pineshire Herald,' drew up a thrilling account of the disaster for his paper, in his finest language, of course describing it as 'a shocking fatality which has cast a decided gloom over the locality.' Rumour was busy with the events at Agra House which had preceded the catastrophe—how Miss Chevening had run away the day before, it was

believed to be secretly married to young Mr. Allen up in London, and how his father was actually on his way to stop the runaway match. Many wondered 'how Madam Chadwick would take it,' and especially how she was 'left.'

Little of all this gossip had penetrated the Vicarage walls; the Vicar had gone up to Agra House, as his office required, to offer sympathy and religious consolation, without succeeding in seeing any of the family. Lady Adela and Miss Hotham were there in attendance on Guy, but they were thrown very much on their own resources, for Mrs. Chadwick was too prostrated to pay any attention to their comforts.

One evening, a day or two after the accident, Millicent was sitting alone in the Vicarage, when a visitor was announced, and Ida entered.

For a time she clung to Millicent without a word, incapable of speech for the deep dry sobbing that shook her slight frame. The two girls had never been very intimate, and the elder was surprised and even more touched by the confidence and dependence such a visit implied now.

'I know, you poor Ida,' she said, 'I know how horribly sad it is for you—don't try to speak just yet.'

'I must,' said Ida, 'or I shall go mad. Millicent, it is so dreadful at home. Lady Adela manages everything. Mother has left it all to her, and—and they won't let me go to him. He has never spoken—not once since; he was only conscious for a short time.

The doctors say he may get over it yet, but I know he is dying. God *means* him to die—to punish me!'

'Dear Ida, do not give way to such thoughts! God does not punish us through the innocent. If Guy is taken away, it will be not because of any wrong you may have done, but because, though we cannot see or understand it now, it is best so, Ida.'

'You may say so—believe so if you like—but I *know* He is punishing me. Why, Millicent, but for me, Guy would not have gone on that dog-cart. That shows—that shows! Oh, tell me, Millicent, if I speak now and own what I have done, will God forgive me?—will He let Guy live if I do?—will He, Millicent?—will He?'

'Is your silence injuring some one else?'

'Yes,' said Ida in a whisper.

'Then speak, dear, not from any hope of advantage, but because it is right; speak—only to some one who has a better right to hear than I have.'

'I don't know who that is now, and I feel as if I *must* tell somebody. Millicent, if you will sit with your face turned away, and promise not to look at me, I think I could tell *you*. Don't interrupt me, or I can't go on. It was all so long ago, when I was quite a child—is one punished the same for what one does as a child, I wonder?—it is not fair! But Allen had a tutor then—Mr. Melladew; and I—I was silly enough to fall madly in love with him. Miss Henderson knew all about it, and she said he cared for me, too, only he was too proud to show it. And I believed it all, and when

Mr. Melladew was sent away I was miserable. Then Miss Henderson managed for herself and me to go down to Bournemouth; she hinted that perhaps *he* would be there part of the time. But I didn't see him, and she went on making excuses for him, and I believed them. At last one day I did see him—and he passed by without even looking at me, and I couldn't understand it. She told me he was so sensitive, felt my step-father's treatment so very keenly, and that was why he had not liked to speak to me. So she arranged meetings with him in various places, and I gave her letters to take to him and she brought back answers by word. But he wouldn't write or consent to see me, she said—not yet, at least, and she said after each interview with him that she had *almost* persuaded him that there would be no harm in his just meeting me for once. He was so dreadfully poor, she said—too poor to stay there very long, for he had scarcely any money and my step-father had refused to pay him any salary. I was so afraid he would leave without seeing me again, and I hated to think that he had not been fairly treated at our house. I thought he was angry with me, too, a little, and that was why he would go on refusing to see me. Oh, I know I was silly to be deceived so easily—but just remember how young I was, and I thought myself so desperately in love, then! . . . Well, I wanted him to have the money, and yet I had none of my own, or not enough, and I knew my step-father would never pay. Then I remembered that at home I had a valuable locket which I never wore. If I could only sell that

and send him the money and make him think my step-father sent it—people do those things in novels, and I had read so many! Even if he found me out, it would touch him, I thought. But I was afraid to sell the thing myself in any of the Bournemouth shops—I thought the people would ask questions, or cheat me, perhaps. Then at last I thought if I could only get some one at home to do it for me—but Margot was at Bournemouth with me, and besides I knew she would refuse, for she did not like Mr. Melladew. There was only Allen—and Allen hated me, and was just as likely to tell somebody to spite me, or tease me about it always in a hateful way he had! But I knew he would do anything for Margot, and so—you know I write so like her—I put her name to the letter. The lockets were both exactly the same, so if he took hers instead of mine, it wouldn't matter, and I meant to explain it all. So I sent the letter, without telling Camilla about it, and she promised that she would manage some way of bringing us together very soon. I waited and waited for an answer from Allen, but before it came I found a letter from Camilla one dreadful morning asking me to forgive her for having deceived me from the first. It was she whom Mr. Melladew had been in love with all the time; he had arranged that they should meet now and then, and as soon as she had stayed at Bournemouth the right number of days, he was to come down and marry her at the Registry Office, and they had been just married when she wrote. I thought I should have died then—I wanted to. . . . I was very very ill; every-

thing was a blank for ever so long, and even when I remembered, I couldn't be sure how much of it was real, and how much a dreadful, shameful dream! I did not seem to love him any longer. I couldn't believe that I ever had really loved him like that, and yet—there was that letter about the locket! . . . I knew Allen was going away, and I was half afraid of—I don't know what—so I asked Margot one day why he had to go. I forget what she said, but it made my mind easier, and when I looked and found both the lockets all right, I felt sure I had dreamed it all—or at least that Allen had not done what I had asked him. So I made myself believe—you know how you can make yourself believe things!—that all that part was not real, only imagination, and gradually I got not to think about it at all—it was not a pleasant subject, I need not tell you. . . . Millicent, why do you say nothing?' she broke off, inconsistently enough.

'I am thinking . . . it is all so strange, so new to me,' said Millicent, 'I can't understand it all at once. Had Allen's going away anything to do with your letter?'

'Yes, yes—oh! didn't I tell you? He *did* believe the writing was Margot's, and he took the locket out of her room—only, he was caught in the act, and he thought Margot wanted it kept a secret—I had said so, because I *did* want it, very much—so he never said anything. . . . Millicent, indeed I didn't know all this then! Tell me, was what I did so very bad?'

'If you really did not know—though surely you

might have guessed, you might have asked more questions than you did—I think no one would blame you very severely; you were very young, and, as you say, very foolish. Is that all, Ida?'

'Not quite all,' said Ida. 'You know that at Homburg poor Guy proposed to me. I love him far, far better than ever I did Mr. Melladew; I didn't know then what love really meant—I do now. . . Well—and I was so happy again, and yet—and yet, from things Guy said, I knew that he would leave off liking me if he thought I had ever cared for anyone before him. You see,' she added, with some *naïveté*, 'I had told him that I never had—he made me. Then we came home, and the same night Margot told me . . . oh, Millicent, it was terrible! First of all she asked me if I had really written that letter, and I was obliged to say I had, though I had really forgotten—almost forgotten—doing it! Then she told me all about Allen's being accused of theft, and how a wicked, wicked maid of ours had found my wretched letter, and meant to show it to my step-father. Think, Millicent, what I felt then!—it would all come out—Guy would know everything—he would be sure to believe I was worse than I really was; and my step-father never liked me, and I was so afraid of him! Margot tried to make me tell her everything, but I was frightened—I would not say anything more, except beg her to save me somehow. I went on my knees to her. I said I would run away, drown myself—anything rather than face my step-father after he knew. I was perfectly frantic. And at last, Margot said she had

thought of a way—if I would promise not to betray myself, she would take all the blame. You see,' added Ida, 'it did not matter for *her* so much—she had parted with Nugent already; and then she is braver than I am, naturally, and my step-father liked her much the best. And it was a good deal her fault, too—she owned that herself—for believing Allen was a thief, and getting him sent away. If she had been kinder, it would have been all found out at once. . . So I agreed, and the next day she told everything, leaving my name out of course, and I believe my step-father was terribly angry. Then Margot ran away, and a telegram came, and he started off to drive to the station in a fearful passion, and mother got Guy to go with him, and then—you know what happened after that . . . And you see, it *was* my fault that Guy had to go, and God *is* punishing me!' concluded Ida in a strain of perverse insistence.

'Has Allen been found?—why is he not at home?'

'Ah, that is the worst of it! He is dead, Millicent: he died in a hospital in London somewhere. Masterman has gone up to-day to arrange about bringing him home.'

'Dead!' exclaimed Millicent. 'Allen dead, too!'

'It is dreadful, isn't it!' said Ida; 'but there are so many other dreadful things now! . . . Millicent, I wish you would tell me again that you don't think I have been so *very* wicked.'

'I can't tell you so,' said Millicent indignantly; 'I *do* think you have been wicked, wickedly selfish and cowardly, to let Margot sacrifice herself for your sake!'

Ida began to weep in an injured manner. 'Millicent!' she sobbed, 'I didn't think you would speak so cruelly to me—when Guy is dying, and I am so miserable! . . . I wish I had never told you—but you are not to breathe a word to anyone else; mind, I put you on your honour!'

'You don't deserve to be happy, Ida. Why, even now, it is only yourself you think about! Are you going to let Margot take all the blame upon herself? Have you never suspected *why* she and Nugent agreed to part? You talk of my being on my honour. I did not pledge myself in any way—and I do not mean to let my only brother be wretched all his days to spare you a little uneasiness. If this leads him to alter his opinion of Margot, he has a right to be told, and he shall be told!'

Once before, Millicent remembered, she had gone through a scene with Margot herself, in which her indignation had been roused in a somewhat similar way; but the elder Miss Chevening, even when she seemed most heartless, had never excited the contempt she felt now for this weak, nerveless sister of hers.

'If he does alter his opinion,' Ida argued sullenly, 'it will be no good now. Margot told me he was nothing to her now, and never could be!'

'She is very much to him still, which is reason enough. If you were more generous, you would not turn a statement she made to induce you to accept the sacrifice into an argument against her now. I shall

tell my brother everything, Ida, though it shall remain a secret to everyone else. If you are wise, though, you will tell Guy.'

'Tell Guy!' Ida burst out passionately. 'Guy is dying—what does it matter to me now, if all the world knows! Everyone is unkind to me now, just when I thought I was going to be so happy! Why have I come here, when Guy may be wanting me, calling for me this minute? I will not stay any longer—he may be dying even now, and I away from him!'

When Ida had gone, Millicent sat in a reverie which was sad enough; her heart was sore for the bright young life on which so many hopes and interests depended, and which seemed about to close with such pitiful suddenness and futility; sore for that other life, that had ended yet more pitifully in the London hospital, after so much unmerited and unrecompensed suffering; sore for his father, cut off in the first bitterness of discovering an irreparable injustice.

It seemed hard and unnatural almost to think of constructing any happiness out of such wreckage as this, and yet she felt a great hope, now that Nugent had quitted Margot in ignorance of all the facts, that fuller knowledge would infallibly soften his heart towards her, and restore something of his lost ideal.

Millicent longed to be the means of bringing them together again, and that night she wrote a long letter, in which she told all she had learnt from Ida, and pleaded all excuses that could be urged in mitigation of the part Margot had played, and this letter, with many

prayers for its success, she posted in the village next day.

. . . . . .

It may be true enough, as a general axiom, that a law of inexorable logic works out the consequences of every sin, whether of commission or omission, to the end of the chain ; and in some cases the operation of the law is made visible to the most careless of us—an object-lesson from which we may deduce a useful moral for our brothers' edification. But, in other cases, the moral is less patent ; it almost seems as if the Furies had wearied of tormenting the evil-doer, or Nemesis had found her lame foot too much of a clog, and limped home again. Yet, even here, the cessation may be rather apparent than real, or the retribution be deferred and fall under conditions at which we can but dimly guess. Perhaps there are some natures, too, so weak and irresponsible as to be unworthy of punishment under any conceivable scheme of justice.

We cannot know, nor is it very profitable perhaps to touch on these questions in this place, except by way of preparation for the fact that, after all, the punishment Ida dreaded was averted. Guy did not die ; his strong constitution brought him through in time, and Ida escaped with a season of wearing anxiety which many a girl whose thoughtlessness and selfishness have harmed none seriously but herself has been called upon to bear, with no such happy conclusion to redeem it as came to Ida. For Lady Adela, in her joy at Guy's recovery, abandoned her former cold toleration of his

choice. Ida's pale prettiness and graceful timidity, together with their fellowship in affliction, had won her heart, particularly as all that had made such an alliance most objectionable was now removed.

Chadwick had died a wealthy man, and without having had time to destroy or alter the will he had made in favour of his wife and her children. Ida would be entitled to a considerable sum on her marriage, and the Hothams were not rich enough to be entirely uninfluenced by the fact.

As for Mrs. Chadwick, after the first shock was passed, she was able to realise how wonderfully accident (she spoke of it reverently as 'Providence') had favoured her at a desperate crisis. The husband she had never loved and had learnt to fear would never trouble her more; an uncouth and repulsive step-son was gone, too, where he could be no disgrace to them; she was free, rich; the scandal which might have injured them had had no time to get abroad—she had everything now for which she endured the humiliation and penance of her second marriage.

One of her earliest acts was to get rid of Susan, and, though not a wise woman in many respects, Mrs. Chadwick was astute enough to take a tone towards the girl which convinced her that her power was gone. But then, Susan, subdued and terrified by the tragedy she had helped to bring about, with her malice baulked and her ambition frustrated, was not a very difficult person to deal with; she left, and her further doings do not concern this history.

Still there was one drop of bitterness in Mrs. Chadwick's cup. After sending that telegram from the hospital, Margot had suddenly disappeared. As soon as Mrs. Chadwick was in a condition to realise this, she made search for her daughter in all the most possible quarters, but without success. She had not gone to her aunt, Lady Yaverland, nor to any of her old Chiswick friends; Mrs. Antrobus knew nothing of her, and soon a terrible dread of another and yet more cruel tragedy beset Mrs. Chadwick, giving her no rest by night or day. At last, to her inexpressible relief, news came in the shape of a letter from Margot herself; it seemed to have been delayed by foreign posts, and simply said that she had gone abroad, and that her mother was not to feel any anxiety about her, as she was perfectly safe and in good hands. She had not been able to stay in England, she said; she had not dared, after all, to remain and face her step-father. When Guy was out of danger, and Ida was on a visit to Hawleigh Court, her mother wrote to inform Margot that there was no longer any reason why she should not return to her home.

The letter, which was addressed to a foreign *poste restante* which Margot had given as her direction, remained long unanswered, and the reply when it arrived struck the mother with consternation.

'You ask me to come back,' wrote Margot, 'after all I have done, and all it has ended in! I will *never* come back—I could not! If I touched that money, if I shared in the enjoyment of it in any way, I should

feel I was taking the price of their lives, which I helped to throw away. It is different for you and the others—but for *me*! Oh, don't you understand that I could never do it now—it would be too horrible! Write to me to the addresses I will send you; tell me everything, every little thing about all of you, only don't try to make me change my mind—don't try to trace me or even to know what I am doing. It is enough that I am no unhappier than I ought to be, and far, far better treated than I deserve.'

'Poor dear child!' sighed her mother; 'she takes such a very high-flown view of it—so absurd now, too, when she might come back and no one would say a word against her! She always was so headstrong. But, never mind, she can't go *on* feeling like that, that's one comfort. I wish I knew whom she was with—she is probably in a situation of some kind, and she will soon get tired of that, thank goodness! I must leave her to herself a little; she will come home all the sooner!'

But week followed week, and Mrs. Chadwick's anticipations were not fulfilled. Margot's brief notes contained no hint of any slackening in her resolution. She did not return.

CHAPTER XII

NUGENT UNDERSTANDS AT LAST

> Faithful she is, but she forsakes;
> And fond, yet endless woe she makes:
> And fair! but with this curse she's cross'd
> To know her not till she is lost!
>
> *George Meredith.*

MILLICENT'S letter was delivered safely enough at Nugent's rooms, but it lay there unopened till long afterwards. He found that he could not stay in London—he could not bear his chambers in Lincoln's Inn—the contrast between his present state of mind and that in which he had last sat there was too sharp to be borne as yet; every object his hand touched or his eye fell upon held a sting of happier recollection.

He wandered past the streets and squares around the Park; the silent thoroughfares, the blank house-fronts, with their drawn blinds and window boxes where the past season's flowers were dying untended, were more than depressing to him just then. On the night after his return he had made a dreary pilgrimage across the Park to Albert Hall Mansions; there, beyond the glass roof, were the coloured fires, the silvery haze of electric light, the music, the crowd, just as on that

evening last July. He looked up at the dark mass of buildings behind him, and saw, dim against the moonless sky, the balcony where he had stood with Margot, and all her strange wayward beauty, the sweetness and surprise of her sudden capitulation, the touch of sadness—superstitious it had seemed then—when the brilliancy of the scene below had vanished and the bell clanged in the gloom—all this came back to his sick mind. Now he knew what reason she had had for foreboding, with a conscience burdened by the sin of that betrayal, her happiness—for assuredly she had been happy—poisoned by the knowledge that she had won his love by a lie. Why, knowing her as he did now, could he not be content at his deliverance?—why could he not forget?

He determined to try what change could do for him: he would escape from all these memories, and Norway seeming just then as good a place as any other, he started next day for Christiania. It was the old story of *cœlum non animum*, though, for a time, the novelty and picturesqueness of fjord and peak and cataract, the sport—for he was a keen fisherman—the primitive villages, the quaint, kindly simplicity of their inhabitants, acted as anodynes or distractions.

But, with familiarity, this effect passed off, and Margot's face began to haunt him with more and more persistency. He saw her now as she had looked at their final parting, when she had rejected his entreaty that she would let him take her from that house of strife. With what a strange, calm dignity she had spoken! How

came it, he wondered, that after all her misdeeds she still had the art of making others seem in the wrong? She deserved that he should despise her, that he should think no more of her, except as an illusion he had once held for the fair reality; but he longed for her, yearned for her still with a yearning that would not be stifled. He had ordered no letters to be forwarded, though he wrote to Millicent occasionally. In his letters to her he made no allusion to Margot or the past, and she, regarding his silence as a token that her mediation had failed, was silent too. But one of her letters told him of the deaths of Allen and his father, and the news produced a reaction in Orme's mind against Margot.

It was owing to her that he felt a personal share in the responsibility for Allen's fate. But for the lie she had told him, he would have been gentler that night when they had met at the station; he would not have allowed him to break away without more than a half-hearted protest. She had made an accomplice of him after all! Now she was triumphant; he pictured her fair and tranquil and proud as ever, with the end she had striven for accomplished just when all had seemed lost. Yes, he could hate her now, but to hate was a greater misery than to love.

He came back unrested, unhealed, and when he got to his rooms one murky evening in October, there was a pile of letters on his table, which he opened and read one by one without curiosity or interest. One, in Millicent's handwriting he left, brother-like, to the last;

this one was the letter she had written on the night of Ida's confession.

As he read it, his first emotion was a mighty overpowering joy. The wrong she had done had been done in ignorance; she was innocent of all that had seemed so diabolical, so monstrous in its unscrupulousness. It was all a tragedy of errors. What she had told him about Allen she had honestly believed—what she had done afterwards was in a desperate, mistaken effort to save others, to postpone action until she knew whether her worst fears were true or not. And after the joy came hot shame, poignant remorse for having doubted her this second time, for not clinging—in the teeth of all evidence, all appearances—to the instinct which, though too faintly, had whispered that she of all women in the world was the last to do this thing. Would she ever pardon him this second disloyalty?—would she be generous enough to recognise that her own silence, her compromising speech and conduct, had all helped to keep him in his error?—would she remember that he had at least offered to remain by her through it all?

He could not tell; but he felt that, if she loved him still, she would forgive him even this, and he determined to lose no more time; he would go down to Gorsecombe next day, and see whether his love's heart was hardened against him.

Unfortunately he had still to finish his letter, and the end contained the news of Margot's flight on the day of his own departure, and the absence of all trace of her since. The next morning his anxiety was

in some measure relieved by another letter from Millicent, from which he learnt that Mrs. Chadwick had heard from her daughter, who was understood to be abroad and not expected to return for some time.

This did not prevent him from going down to Gorsecombe, and, on his arrival, he went up to Agra House and had an interview with Mrs. Chadwick, whom he found in mourning as little unbecoming or obtrusively inconsolable as a widow's weeds can be.

She met his appeal for any information respecting Margot with fluent evasiveness: she really could tell him nothing. Dear Margot was travelling with friends, her movements depended on them, and were so very uncertain.

'But you write to her,' he said; 'you surely must know where a letter will find her!'

'It is very painful for me to have to tell you,' said Mrs. Chadwick, 'but the truth is that I have ceased to have any communications with her for some time. Of course I have satisfied myself that she is under proper care—she is acting (this is in the *strictest* confidence, remember,—I wouldn't have it known in Gorsecombe for the world!)—but she is acting as travelling companion to a lady—she prefers that and dependence to living at home under her mother's roof! She persists in refusing to come home. So at last I told her plainly that I must decline to encourage such folly by keeping up any correspondence with her until she tells me she is ready to come back and behave sensibly. I have not heard

from her since—and you can imagine what a trial it all is for a mother.'

Nugent thought he knew the reason of Margot's determination; he wondered afterwards how much, if anything, Mrs. Chadwick knew of the secret history of the tragedy, but it was impossible to guess from her manner.

'At least,' he pleaded, 'you can give me the address to which you last wrote?'

Mrs. Chadwick hesitated before replying in her most engaging tones: 'Really, dear Mr. Orme, I don't see what good it would be if I did; it would be very unlikely for any letter written there to reach her now. But I am afraid I must refuse to give you even so much help as that. You see, it is not as if you were anything to one another now. I don't know which of you was responsible for breaking off your engagement, but I have no reason in the least to believe that she has changed her mind since—if you have. Mr. Orme,' she said—and there was really a ring of greater sincerity in her voice—'I do want her to be left alone at present; if she is worried with appeals or messages, if she thinks anyone is trying to find her out, we shall lose her altogether; promise me that you will leave her to herself, that you will not persecute her! Indeed I believe that you will do yourself no good, and you may do her and us much harm.'

Orme had a bitter consciousness that this was true, that he had lost the right of approaching her now, even if he had the means; it was possible that her determina-

tion to remain away was partly inspired by the wish to avoid him.

He made no further attempt to trace her; he must leave it to time to decide whether they were to meet again, and what would come of it. In his heart he cherished a hope that proud, high-spirited Margot would not be able to endure dependence long—that when her patience broke down she would recognise that she had no other place but home to go to for shelter. But this hope, after sustaining him through the winter, grew fainter and fainter when spring came and summer was at hand, and still there were no tidings of Margot.

It was Whitsuntide again; Orme had not seen his home since Christmas, and now the warm May sunshine, the budding trees, the pink-and-white almond blossom in the Park, stirred in him a languid impulse to see Gorsecombe once more in the freshness of early summer. Perhaps this time all the painful associations would have grown fainter; he might even hear news of her who still was seldom out of his thoughts for very long.

And so he was sitting once more at luncheon in the pretty shabby Vicarage dining-room, with the green venetian blinds half let down and the warm breeze stealing in through the open windows. He had only just arrived, his father and mother and Millicent were all there, and the conversation had been mostly carried on by the Vicar, who could talk about nothing just then but the conduct of the Rector of a neighbouring village in instituting proceedings against a farmer churchwarden for brawling in church, the 'brawling' consist-

ing in leaving the building pointedly during a part of the service he objected to. 'It's a great pity,' he said; 'do so much harm about here, with the strong feeling there is against tithes; it will be a mercy if it does not drive many to Dissent! I can't think why Tancred hasn't more tact than to provoke his parishioners like this! *I* never find any difficulty in getting on with mine. Stick to the Rubric and they can't give you any trouble—that has always been *my* rule, and I've never had any unpleasantness with the Bishop as yet.'

So he talked on, asking Nugent, whose knowledge of ecclesiastical law was not exactly profound, for his opinion on the legal aspect of the case. Nugent answered as satisfactorily as he could, though his thoughts were elsewhere; there were questions he was longing to ask and yet dared not.

At last, when the Rev. Mr. Tancred was exhausted as a topic, Mrs. Orme said to Millicent, 'I suppose, Millie, when you were in the village this morning, you didn't happen to see anything of Margot?'

Her daughter's face warned her too late that she had been indiscreet.

'No, mamma,' said Millicent. 'I saw Miss Momber at Cannister's, and she asked me to tell you that there is a poor family in one of those cottages on the Duckford Road, just before you turn to go off to——'

'Is Margot back?' Nugent interrupted, doubting whether he could have heard aright. 'Surely, mother said Margot——?'

'Yes, yes,' said Millicent nervously; 'she—she

only came back last night—I have not seen her at all yet.'

'She has not come home from—from illness, or anything of that kind, has she?' demanded Nugent.

'No—at least,' said Millicent, 'I have not heard. I don't know really, Nugent. . . . Are you going out?' For he had risen.

'I want to—to take a look round the old place,' he said, with affected carelessness; 'and I may make one or two calls.'

'Were you thinking of going to Agra House?'

Orme was not in the habit of colouring, but there was an additional tinge in his cheeks as he answered: 'I shall probably go there—yes.'

'Wait a little—let me walk there with you,' she said. 'I only have my clothing accounts to go through, and some flowers to take down to the church for the decorations.'

'Can't wait now,' he called, laughing, from outside; 'we'll have our walk afterwards.'

'But stop, Nugent—stop just a minute. I—I have something to tell you!'

But he was already outside, and waved his hand to her, smiling, from the gate. 'Tell me afterwards,' he said, and was gone.

She returned to the dining-room rather disconsolate. 'He has gone up there—to see *her*,' she said sadly; 'he wouldn't stay to listen.'

'I quite thought he was cured,' said her mother, 'or I shouldn't have mentioned her name as I did.'

'I wish he was!' said Millicent; 'and now it will come on him quite suddenly, with no preparation. Poor Nugent!'

'Well, well,' said the Vicar philosophically, 'you've been spared an unthankful task, my dear Millie; you know what Shakespeare makes Cleopatra say:

> Though it be honest, it is never good
> To bring bad news: give to a gracious message
> An host of tongues; but let ill tidings tell
> Themselves, when they be felt.

He must hear it some time, and the sooner in these matters the better. I was hoping he'd got over it too, poor boy; I certainly thought they parted by mutual consent. Ah, well! lovers ought to know their own minds. Did you send round to let Fanshawe know I can't take the evening service to night—no? He'll be away at cricket, or up at Holly Lodge with his lady-love, if you don't make haste. There, I suppose I shall have to go myself!'

. . . . . .

Orme could not have borne any companionship just then: he wanted to be alone, to think over this great happiness that had come to him. Margot was back at Gorsecombe—he might see her that very day!

Yet he did not go up to Agra House at once—it was early even in the country for an afternoon call, and he wanted to collect his thoughts, to enjoy this period of anticipation to the full; he had begun to hope again—If she had come back, did not that prove that it was not he who had kept her away?

He walked through the village and along the open roads, finding joy in everything now—in the contrast of the tinted snow of the apple-orchards against the deep blue sky, in the scent of the hawthorn and the aromatic fir-branches, in the mellow impudent notes of the blackbird, the distant call of the cuckoo. All about him Nature was unfolding, renewing, awakening. How could he help seeing in this a type of his own fortunes—a sign that the winter in his heart and life was gone and summer had come back?

Then he came back by the lanes, in which the pink campion and wild hyacinth had almost ousted the last primroses from the banks, and soon he reached the little gate where Margot had waited for him that last day he had seen her.

The net was up, he saw, as he passed the tennis-lawn, and a man in flannels rose from one of the chairs as he approached. He made a movement as if about to hold out his hand, and then seemed aware that he was not recognised.

'You don't remember me, I see,' he said, with a smile.

'I can't say I do at this moment,' said Orme; 'I am so little at Gorsecombe, now.'

'It was in town we met—not down here,' said the other, still smiling, though a little uncomfortably, as if he felt the embarrassment of having to recall himself to Nugent's mind. 'Have you forgotten a certain evening last summer, at Albert Hall Mansions?'

'At Mrs. Antrobus's!' cried Orme, starting. 'To be

sure! I beg your pardon—I remember you perfectly now—your name is Langrish.'

It was Langrish; the man with the weary eyes and the listless manner, whom he had met on the night he had won Margot, and to whom he had never once given a thought since. There were other excuses than this, and the difference between evening clothes and tennis flannels, for his failure to recognise him at once. Langrish had altered greatly since then, and the change was an improvement: he looked a younger and a stronger man than Orme had taken him to be on their first meeting; his eyes had lost that faded look, his whole bearing was brighter and more alert.

'You were going to the house?' he said; 'I'll walk up with you.'

Orme felt an uneasiness too slight to deserve the name of jealousy, yet containing its germs; till now it had not occurred to him that he might have rivalry to contend against as well as alienation—but what could this man want here, unless he came as a lover?

'You are staying here, I suppose?' he said, rather suspiciously.

'For a few days only,' answered Langrish with cheerful carelessness; 'my leave is up, you see, and I am anxious to get back as soon as I can.'

This did not sound very lover-like. 'You want to get back?—to Yokohama—it was Yokohama, I think?'

'It was—and is,' said Langrish. 'Oh, yes, I don't mind it now, you know. I'm taking my wife out with me.'

His wife !—he was married then, and going away in a few days : what absurdities jealousy leads a man into ! The reaction made Orme quite cordial.

'Of course,' he said, 'that makes all the difference. And you must let me offer my very best wishes. I'm afraid I shall not have the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Langrish before you sail, unless,' he added, 'she is staying here with you.'

'You are very kind,' said Langrish, with some stiffness ; 'my wife is here, of course, and you will find her in the house somewhere. If you would like to see her, I am sure she will be equally pleased to see you. I thought possibly you might have come up with that intention.'

Nugent murmured something polite ; Langrish's assumption that he had come up to Agra House solely to make his wife's acquaintance rather tickled him—it was so like the egotism of a newly-married man !

As they entered the hall Reggie and Lettice came running out. The boy, without noticing Nugent, seized upon Langrish. 'I say, you aren't coming in now ?—not when you said you'd play a single with me this afternoon, and I've got the bats out and everything ? I want to see which of us two plays best—I expect we're about equal.'

Langrish laughed very pleasantly and good-humouredly. 'All right, old fellow,' he said, 'I'll have a set with you, if you like ; you must make allowances for my advanced years, you know—I can't run about like you.'

'What bosh!' said Reggie, 'you're as young as *he* is. Come along!'

They disappeared towards the tennis-ground, leaving Lettice and Nugent alone in the hall together. 'Come into the schoolroom, Nugent, do,' said Lettice, 'I've got lots to tell you; 'I've got a new governess, and *I* think she's lovely—only Reggie will say she's bunny-mouthed; she's away now, so you can't see her. . . . Oh, and I want to show you my new drawings. I've been doing some illustrations to Homer—the 'Stories from Homer,' you know. Some of those I've done are *very* good. Only I don't draw helmets nicely, so I've had to put them on ordinary hats. Should you think that mattered? . . . Oh, Kitty, I've forgotten all about you! Look, Nugent, doesn't she make a dear little doll? I dressed her up in my doll's things, but she will *not* keep her tail down; she's in black, you see, because all the dolls went into mourning for poor Allen and father. It's nearly time for them to be in half-mourning now.'

There was a shade of gravity on her face as she spoke Allen's name. 'Poor Allen!' she said softly; 'perhaps if he had stayed here that night instead of going away again, he wouldn't have died. He gave me a letter, and told me to tear it up, Nugent, and Margot cried. I wasn't to tell—but I may tell you. Margot said I might, last night.'

The tearing up of the letter had been unexplained or him till now, and of this, too, she was innocent! He could hardly master his voice for the emotion that

came over him. So Margot had wished him to know —then there was hope!'

'Lettie,' he said, 'I want to see Margot alone—will you help me?—will you run and tell her that I am here, and ask her in kindness to come to me?'

'I thought you and Margot weren't friends any more?'

'I hope we are. I—I want to know what we are to be, dear.'

'Because Margot is only here for a very little while. Oh, Nugent, *can* you get her to stay? Do. I have tried so hard, but she says she must go quite away!'

'If I can help it, Lettice, she shall not go. Now run, like a good child, and ask her to see me.'

'All right,' said Lettice. 'Where shall I tell her you will be? There's nobody in the drawing-room—*I* should wait there, if I were you. Would you like to take Kitty to amuse you in case Margot is a long time? I can spare her.'

Orme declined this hospitable offer, and Lettice skimmed upstairs in search of Margot.

He could not sit still in the shaded drawing-room; he rose and wandered restlessly about, and at length stepped into the conservatory, where the heavy exotic atmosphere seemed charged with the poetry and mystery of love. Would she come? . . . A light step behind him, a delicate sound of drapery; he turned, and all the blood rushed back to his heart—he saw her once again!

She was in black, which at first sight gave her a

fairer and more girlish look, but in her eyes there was the shadow of an ineffaceable pain: the lines of her face were sharper, the paleness of her cheeks had lost its former creamy tint, her hand, too, as he took it, felt frail and unsubstantial in his. She met him with a wistful hesitation, no longer carrying her head erect, as he remembered it of old.

'I saw you coming,' she said; 'I hoped you would not go away without seeing me.'

'What else did I come for?' he said. 'Margot, I –I have heard everything!'

'You have heard?—you will not reproach me now, when I cannot listen to you. . . . What I did was for the best!'

'I have done with reproaches for ever,' he said; 'I only come now to beg you to forgive me this once more. I ought to have believed in you through all—instead of taking it for granted, as I did, that you must be guilty.'

'That was not your fault,' she replied; 'I allowed you to think so.'

'But why? Could you not have trusted me?'

'You see,' she said, 'I knew so little myself—I was afraid to speak of it, to think what it might mean; I wanted to keep the secret from everyone, till I could know more, till I could see the persons I suspected and warn them. Yet I nearly did tell you.'

'If you had!' he cried—'if you only had!'

'Shall I tell you what kept me back? I felt that you would blame me almost as much, if you knew, for

treating him as I had done—for letting him go away that second time. I was afraid of what you would say. And then, when that woman brought the letter, I saw that, in spite of yourself, you believed her—that even if I spoke you would not believe me. That kept me silent, Nugent!'

'I did not deserve to be trusted, I suppose,' he said, 'but I have suffered for it too. Is it not time to let those terrible days be forgotten? Can you not forgive me, even this second and worst failure?'

'What should I be if I could not—if I felt I had any offence to forgive you for?—I, who can never be forgiven now in this world! You must not think I have forgotten what I have done—that I ever shall forget. I have sinned too deeply—the consequences have been too dreadful for that. I have not come home here to live. I should feel that I dare not hope to be happy in this house. But I could not go away without seeing them all for the last time! Could I?'

'Margot!' he cried, 'why must you go away—from England, I mean? Now, when we understand one another! . . . Have some pity on me!—don't leave me again!'

She drew back, horror and bewilderment in her eyes. 'Is it you that speak such words to me as that—now?' she said. 'I thought you an honourable man, Nugent!'

'What have I said? What can there be dishonourable in a renewal of our engagement?'

'Ah!' she cried, 'you said you knew all—and I

thought you meant . . . Can't you understand that—that I am not free!'

'Margot, for God's sake don't keep me in the dark like this! Not free? Does that mean that I am too late—that you are engaged?'

'Did he not tell you—just now—when you were talking together?'

'He! Mr. Langrish! How can that be, when he is married?'

'I am his wife.'

. . . . . .

The events which had contributed to such a result must be told here for the reader's instruction, though Margot could not be expected to give such an explanation to Nugent Orme.

Briefly, then, her history had been as follows: She had waited at the hospital on the morning of Allen's death, until she could bear it no longer. She had her jewellery with her, and a slender stock of money; her great desire was to leave the country, to go far away somewhere; she would go as nurse, lady's maid, governess—anything. Then she remembered that references would certainly be asked for—and what references could she give? Suddenly Mrs. Maberly came back to her mind, and her troubles with companions. There was just a faint hope that she might be still in town, that she might not have engaged anyone; she would go to the Langham before she went anywhere else. Mrs. Maberly by a fortunate chance had not left the hotel, and was still in search of the ideal travelling-companion;

so when she learnt that the lovely Miss Chevening was leaving home for family reasons, and was willing to go abroad with her in any capacity, she was overjoyed.

They left for Paris next day, and for some time Margot had nothing to complain of, though the friend began to merge by slow degrees in the patroness. There were causes enough to prevent Margot from being the lively and interested companion Mrs. Maberly considered she had a right to expect. The news of Chadwick's sudden death came as a fresh blow during her travels, and, though she struggled to do her duty and submit to all the whims and caprices of her employer, her powers were not equal to more.

By-and-by Langrish joined them, and the interest he had felt on first meeting her was heightened now by finding her acting as companion to his sister. He treated her with the utmost tact and delicacy, shielding her in countless ways from his sister's ill-humour; he saw that she was unhappy, and scrupulously refrained from betraying his own feelings. Insensibly she grew to like him, to regard him as a friend, with which, not imagining that he could be more to her, he appeared for the time content.

However, one day he had found her in despair; his sister, being in a more than usually bad temper, had informed Miss Chevening that her services were dispensed with. Margot had no money—all her resources had gone in providing the necessary equipment in Paris; she would not return home—yet, where was she to go?

Then Langrish assured her that she need not fear that his sister would turn her adrift in the world—he would see that she did not go back to England without a suitable escort, if she must go. The fear of losing her altogether made him break a resolution he had made not to avail himself of their relative positions; he told her what a difference she had made in his life, and how, though he ought not to speak, and knew perfectly well he could be nothing to her, yet he could not help himself. If she was not free—if what he hoped could not be, she had only to tell him so, and forget that he had ever spoken.

Margot was in a state to be grateful for all kindnesses; her pride had been brought very low; she had learnt a stern lesson against undervaluing her fellow-creatures; not to mention that Langrish was not personally distasteful to her. She did not actually consent then—what had passed was too terrible and too recent—but she had sufficient confidence in him to tell him all that oppressed her and made her in her own opinion unworthy of a good man's love. He did not take a very harsh view of it, though he said no more of his suit at the time; the breach with Mrs. Maberly was healed by his instrumentality, and matters went on much as before till the tour was nearly over, and then, once more, he returned to the question. He must return to Japan very shortly. Could she give him her answer before he went?

This time she consented. She had no love to give, but, since he was good enough to care for her, she would

try to make one life happier, as some halting atonement for those she had spoilt.

So far she had not regretted; what had been in its inception mere gratitude and liking was growing into a warmer feeling; there were times when she had a guilty conviction that her lot was easier than she had merited, and that the burden she had imposed on herself as some palliative to an ever-present remorse was growing lighter rather than heavier with time.

. . . . . .

To return to the couple we have left: Orme stood staring stupidly down on the red tiles of the floor, trying to force his mind to take in the terrible truth he had just learnt. It was so far beyond the very worst he could have anticipated that, even now, he had a lingering hope that there might be some mistake.

'His wife!' he echoed. 'You are his wife?'

Through the open panes in the roof the words 'Vantage to me!' came in Langrish's voice from the distant tennis-ground, like a mocking and triumphant comment on the situation.

'Indeed, I thought you knew,' repeated Margot piteously; 'I saw you speaking to him on the lawn just now.'

All the incidents of that brief conversation came back to him now in their real meaning—his instinctive jealousy, and the fact that it had been appeased by what was, if he had known it, the death-blow of all his hopes—the touch of ghastly comedy in his unconscious congratulations to the rival who had supplanted him.

'No,' he said drearily; 'I had no suspicion till now. I—I suppose I ought to say something quite safe and commonplace—regret my mistake—wish you every happiness. . . . Well, I can't—not just yet. . . . Margot,' he broke out passionately, 'how could you do this thing? What were *his* claims to mine? You belonged to me! You had no right—I say, no *right*—to leave me for another!'

'I—I hoped you would not have cared like this,' she answered in a low voice; 'I am not worth your caring for. But you must not speak as if I had been untrue to you—as if I had left you. There was a time, when you first knew of that letter,—when you yourself were the first to see that we must part. Yes—yes, I know that afterwards, when the blow fell, you offered to renew the engagement: it was generous of you—I felt that at the time; I feel it still—but it came too late, Nugent!'

'It was not too late, then,' he said; '*you* have made it too late! You could not have patience even this little while—you were in such a violent hurry to throw away your life and mine! And why, Margot? Out of pique—for some fantastic scruple—for revenge? God knows . . . it is beyond me!'

She drew herself up haughtily; for all her newborn humility, there was a flash of anger in her hazel eyes.

'You force me to speak plainly when you use such words,' she said. 'What I did was neither in pique nor revenge. I threw away nothing—you lost nothing—by

my marriage. In no case—Nugent, you must understand me—in *no* case, could our two lives ever have come together again. The love I had for you died when I knew that you had no real faith in me, that you did not love me as I had once thought to be loved. How another woman would have felt, I don't know—but when I saw that, I ceased to value your love. I found that my own was not the same. Think how it would have been, if I had told you all, and you had believed me: you would have found excuses for me for a time—and then, by-and-by, your reason would speak again, and you would condemn me for all the harm I did. Or you would have doubted, in spite of yourself, whether, after all, I had not deceived you—whether I had not been more guilty than I would admit. No, I could not be content with such love—without confidence, without respect, a love from which doubt would never be far away. I could not have lived under a love like that—we should have been miserable, Nugent. Is it cruel of me to say all this now?—I hope not—I do not mean to be. Some day, perhaps, you will see that I was right, and be glad that I drew back in time.'

'That day will never come for me—no, not if I could live on for centuries!' he said; 'but that will not matter to you. . . . Well, there is no more to be said. I have lost you this time, for good and all, and I have no right to complain. What you have just told me is the bitterest blow of all, but I brought that, too, on myself. Forget what I was fool and coxcomb enough to say just now—a man cannot always count his words at first. I have

come to my senses now. I don't pretend I am resigned, or ever shall be resigned, on my own account—but on yours, I think even now I am man enough to feel that it is well that you have chosen what is best. Dear, I do sincerely, earnestly, wish you all happiness now and always!'

'Happiness!' she repeated; 'that is too large a word for me now. But I shall always like to think that you were able to wish it for me—that we part as friends.'

She held out her hand; he took it without another word of farewell, and the next minute he had gone, he hardly knew how, from the house, avoiding all notice, in haste to reach some kindly solitude, some sheltered spot where he would be face to face with his grief.

The last word had been spoken; he had won the heart of his beautiful, self-willed, erring love, but he had not known how to keep it, and now all hope of regaining it must end! As surely as if the future had been unfolded before his eyes, did he know that he would look upon Margot's face and hear her voice never again! And, in the first agony of that knowledge and all it implied, he envied the fate of Allen Chadwick, the poor despised outcast, whom she had never loved, never even liked, but who had at least been privileged to die for her!

THE END.

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